

**“New Heaven and Earth”
Revelation 21-22
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Most of us don't want to go to heaven.... now!

Except when we are in the midst of physical or emotional pain so great that we say, “Anything but this!”, most of us have little desire to leave this life.

For most of us heaven is a great alternative to hell but we don't think of heaven as a great alternative to life as we now enjoy it.

It is true that God built into us a survival instinct that makes us cling to this life but there is something else going on in this disregard for heaven:

We think so little about the life to come that what we have seems more secure and attractive to us than the future we don't understand.

Do you truly want to go to heaven?

Again I don't mean just instead of going to hell - do you want to go to heaven?

Honestly, many of us don't.

Why? We have no vision, no picture of the future that has captured our minds and hearts.

I want us to have from today's Bible text, such a vision of the future that absolutely nothing will deter us on your way to heaven.

I want us to have such a picture of what it will be like to be with God that any hardship in this life of faith in God will seem insignificant compared to what is coming.

I want us to carry with us every day an impression of what is yet to come - so it will encourage us, challenge us, give us life focus and purpose.

The Christmas poem says “Twas the night before Christmas...and “the children sleeping all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads.”

I want visions of heaven to dance in our heads.

My task today feels impossible!

I have laid hold of a subject too high, too wide, too deep to get the arms of my mind around.

I feel like the Apostle John must have felt when he saw what he describes in Revelation 21 and 22 - this is indescribable.

But as hard as it was to describe, when he was done telling what he saw what do you think he expected his first readers to know and feel?

To whom was he writing?

To those in Ephesus he said, “you have endured hardships for Jesus’ name”.

To those in Smyrna he wrote, “some of you will be put in prison” and some of you will die.

To those in Pergamum he said that some had been threatened with death.

To those in Philadelphia he said I know you are very tired.

Life in some ways, was not good, but to each of them he also said, another day is coming!

In fact John’s reason for writing is declared in the first verses of the letter when he writes: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.”

Likewise Jesus said to him, “Write what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”

John wanted his readers to know how the story ends.

He wanted them to know what would eventually happen to them.

Anyone with any familiarity with the Bible knows there is a story line that runs throughout:

the story began with God creating everything including people but soon people messed it up royally with sin.

And the bulk of the story told in the Bible is of God’s gracious intervention in human history to restore his creation - to redeem what he has made - to remake it into what he originally intended.

That’s why Jesus came - to remove the barrier of sin and give us a new life.

That’s why the Holy Spirit comes to each of us - to begin his work of remolding, reshaping us into the humans God intended.

So God’s people are a work in progress.

But is that the end of the story? Will we be forever in process?

NO!

God says Jesus is coming again and when he does the work he began in us will be completed.

The story of the Bible doesn’t end with an unending history of people becoming Christians and then dying and going to heaven.

No there is a full end to the story.

Think of it this way also:

John was writing to people who were in trouble and he said a new day is coming.

Then for the next many chapters of Revelation he describes how most things will get worse - God's wrath will be poured out on the earth, Satan and those who follow him will persecute God's people, but then Jesus will come and destroy those who oppose God and his people.

And then after Jesus' millennial rule on earth, a judgment day is coming when every unbeliever will be resurrected from the grave and thrown into the lake of fire forever.

Evil is defeated forever - and evil doers are eternally incarcerated.
End of story? NO! - What about us? What about believers?

Ah, yes! The rest of the story!

Revelation 21 and 22 tell it.

The first thing I want you to see is that what John is now describing in these chapters is what we usually call "heaven".

He is describing the place where God's people live forever with God after history as we know it comes to an end.

After briefly describing the place in verses 1 and 2, John writes, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God'"

Later in the description he writes that no one will live there except 21:27 "only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." We saw last week from many places in Scripture that means those who truly belong to God - genuine believers.

In 22:5 speaking of those same believers in that same place it says, "they will reign for ever and ever."

In these chapters, telling the end of the story, John is describing heaven.

Again this week, as last, I feel it is important to remind you to distinguish between the two ways we refer to what happens to believers after death.

Because the Bible says that Jesus is now in heaven and because God says believers go to be with Jesus as soon as they die - it is right to say that believers go immediately to heaven.

But that is not the heaven being described in Revelation 21-22.

We know that a dead believer does not have a body until the resurrection takes place when Jesus comes again.

So when Jesus comes again and the bodies of believers are resurrected, and after the millennium, all believers will enter the heaven described in Revelation 21-22.

Now I have not **described** that heaven yet, I've just noted that the heaven being discussed here is not what we usually think of when we speak of someone today dying and going to heaven.

We here are discussing the heaven to come - the one in which God's people will live forever and ever in resurrected bodies.

Now to describe this eternal heaven what does John say?

21:1-3 "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... 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 from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men..."

Here John describes the eternal dwelling place of believers in two basic ways: He calls it a new heaven and a new earth AND he calls it a Holy City.

What I want you to see is that the "heaven" in which believers will live forever with God is not "out there" somewhere.

I looked at some of our gospel songs and hymns to get an idea of where we think heaven is.

The song we sang earlier says, "When the roll is called UP YONDER". Where?

Another song entitled "In the sweet by and by" says we will stand on that "beautiful shore" - Where?

Yet another says, "We shall see him face to face, FAR BEYOND THE STARRY SKY". - Where?

"I'll Fly Away" to "God's celestial shore" - Where?

"Marching to Zion" says "to fairer worlds on high" - where?

Much of our language of heaven places it somewhere **out there**.

I think the reason for this is because we mix the two uses of heaven - we know that believers who die now are not here so they must be "out there" wherever God is and then we fail to correct the location of heaven when we speak of where believers will be for eternity.

But the Bible says that the eternal heaven is actually the new earth and the universe surrounding it.

Another point of clarification - when John writes in verse 1 "I saw a new heaven... for the first heaven... passed away" he is not saying the place where God now resides passed away - he is using the word "heaven" in the way we do when we look into beautifully starry sky and say the "heavens are marvelous tonight."

The heaven that passed away and the new heaven are references to the sky and universe around the earth.

This is the same way we understand Genesis 1:1 when we read "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

So again, the place where God's people will live with him forever is on the new earth and the universe that surrounds it.

So we can rightly say, we don't go to heaven, but heaven comes to us.

Maybe the reason some Christians, especially young believers, don't have much appetite for heaven is because they have a wrong perception of where heaven is and what it is.

The popular media and even some of our songs leave us with the impression that heaven is made up of pudgy little angelic bodies floating on white puffy clouds with nothing else around them except other pudgy little angelic bodies with harps and halos listening to some Musack sounds with an occasionally interruption from some synthesized deep-bass voice that only accentuates the idea that God is somewhere else.

Others sing or speak of mansions on streets of Gold in some literalistic fashion that makes it sound like a perpetual suburbia.

No wonder some are not very interested in heaven.

But heaven is not "out there" on the beautiful isle of somewhere.

Heaven is the new earth.
Now this starts to sound interesting.

Where does the new earth come from?
John doesn't tell us but Paul and Peter do.

Peter describes it this way: 2 Peter 3:7ff "...the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men...But the day of the Lord will come... The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

Paul said it this way:
Romans 8:20ff "For the creation itself waits in eager expectation ...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

In some way, whether by literal fire and destruction or otherwise, God is going to renovate, transform or recreate this earth into a new earth.

Because of what Jesus' resurrected body was like and what God teaches about the resurrection of our physical bodies, in that they will be the same but transformed, new but the same, truly our bodies and at the same time new bodies - physical and recognizable, so I believe the new earth will be this earth but new, the same but transformed, physical and recognizable.

God will refashion this world into what he originally intended it to be before sin entered it and warped it.

Now having said all of that, **how does John describe the eternal heaven on the new earth?**

I think that if I asked you what you think "heaven" will be like - many of you would speak of beautiful remote places - a south sea island, a mountainside in the Alps, a garden in Eden.

But when God describes the eternal heaven, how does he describe it? Do you see it? **A city!!**

Most of this longest description of heaven in the Bible, is of a city - Revelation 21:9 - 22:5.

When we think of cities we think of crowded, crime-infested, frenetic, places that many people would rather escape.

In verse 5 God said, "I am making everything new!"
Is he ever!

He is taking the most obvious evidence of the failure of human beings to make their own heaven - cities - and he will make it heaven.

I don't think John is hereby declaring that the eternal heaven is one gigantic city on the new earth.

While I assume there will be cities on the new earth, I think John is using the symbolism of a great city to describe what heaven will be like.

And it is called the Holy City, Jerusalem, because all through the Bible, Jerusalem is the spiritual, cultural, and geographical center of the presence of God and the people of God - The word Jerusalem came to stand for the people of God.

So what will heaven be like?

First of all it is a place of indescribable beauty.

It was bright with light: 21:11 "It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."

21:23 "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."

He describes the place as **immense** - 1400 miles on each side.
It's walls are made of a precious stone - jasper - translucent, crystal green.

The city is of pure gold, as pure as glass.

The foundations are decorated with every kind of precious stone.

He then mentions 12 different kinds of jewels that make up the foundations.

The main street, for there was usually one main street in ancient cities, was pure gold - like transparent glass.

You can't get all those descriptions to fit what we know about precious stones, architecture, metal work etc.

You can't take these descriptions and make them fit a literal city - they are once again, John's attempts to describe the indescribable.

What makes jewels, precious stones, so valuable is what they do with light.

They reflect light in such a way as to allow us to see color in a more pure way than any way else.

This entire city that John sees is a kaleidoscope of color.

The new earth will be brighter, and sharper, and more colorful and more beautiful than even its most beautiful place now.

Do you know what its like to climb a high mountain and finally reach the summit and look around and be struck with the beauty around you?
Have you watched a sunset on the plains or over the ocean and thought to yourself nothing could be more spectacularly colorful or awesome?

The beauty you see in this earth today is just a foretaste of what it will be when God redeems the earth.

I wonder if in all of us there is a yearning for what that will be like.

Does that explain our fascination with babies?

You look into the face of a baby and you see the closest thing you will ever see in this life to what God intended humanity to be.

The freshness, the newness, the innocence, the beauty that will all too soon bear ever-increasing scars of the sin that runs rampant in this life.

But for just a short while - we catch a glimpse of the perfection that will be the new physical creation.

But John's vision of the new Jerusalem not only demonstrates the physical beauty of the eternal heaven on earth but it also demonstrates the activity of heaven.

Some people aren't too eager to go to heaven because they've led to believe that heaven is a place where you either rest forever or at best you stand around and sing for eternity.

While singing will clearly be a part of heaven, it is not one continuous worship service - at least not as you think of worship services.

On the new earth there is activity - there is work.

Work transformed.

When God created Adam he put him to work.

And it wasn't until Adam sinned that work became a chore - a labor in the negative sense of that word.

On the new earth there will be work but the work will be purposeful and fulfilling. Revelation 22:3,5 says "the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him... And they will reign for ever and ever."

You who are so full of life and so full of energy right now - consider this - heaven **is not doing nothing for ever.**

It is a new earth filled with every perfect opportunity to work in ways that matter and bring the greatest satisfaction.

Have you ever been involved in a project that you just couldn't put down? Even though you had to sleep, you could hardly wait to get back at it? You felt alive, productive and creative? And you found the greatest satisfaction in seeing the task completed and successful?

Such is heaven - a place where every task is that fulfilling.

Heaven is beautiful, it is purposeful activity and most of all it is relationships.

I'm convinced that is the primary reason God shows John a city as the symbol of heaven on the new earth.

Nearly 100 years ago a writer captured the point, I think:

"The ideal life which God sets before us as the life of heaven is the life of a city, with streets, and walls, and gates, and boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. Because the instinct to seek a common life, to form a complicated web of mutual dependence, which is represented by a city is after all a true one, and the opportunity for its exercise essential alike to man's true happiness and the full development of his powers. It is not good for man to be alone; neither is it good for a family to be alone, nor yet for a group of families; and this vision shows us (that heaven) as realized in the corporate life of humanity, is a society so vast that none of God's children is left out of it, and yet so compact that it can best be described as the society of those who dwell in one city."

(C Anderson Scott in Smith)

We long to belong!

Human beings were created to relate to each other.

We have so warped that, and so abused each other that often times we think of heaven as getting away from people.

But God knows that our true humanity is lived in relationships.

And heaven will be a place where all God's people belong.

Can you remember a time when you were with someone and it was just very enjoyable - the subject of conversation wasn't what made it so good - it was just one of those experiences when you felt like there didn't need to be an agenda - it was just good to be together. It was two friends enjoying life with no point to prove.

That is just a glimpse of what relationships can always be in heaven.

Have you ever been part of a family or of a group where you just knew you belonged - you didn't have to prove anything to anyone in the group - you knew they accepted you.

Into most groups you have to break your way and prove your worth as a conversationalist or humorist or servant - but in this group you are family - you just belong and it feels so comfortable - no pressure to perform.
That's heaven.

Have you ever known the love an other person - a husband, a wife?
A special love that knows no limits, no secrets - just openness, warts and all and yet a wholeness of love? The complete safety of another person's complete knowledge of you with no judgment just acceptance - just love?
That's heaven

And who more than anyone else, if we have cultivated the relationship, will we look forward to seeing face to face?
Jesus himself.

And John says that he will be there and he will be our God and we will be his people for ever and ever.

Have you ever been caught up in the worship of God?

Have you ever just lost track of time in his presence?

Have you ever just basked in his love and delighted in telling him that you love him.

Have you ever had those too fleeting but intense times of joy in being with God?

That was a taste of what heaven will be always.

What will the eternal heaven on the new earth be like?

Beauty beyond description.

Activity and fulfillment that we only catch fleeting moments of now.

Relationships that are genuine, unending, satisfying and forever - no death or separation there.

And Jesus -

Do you want to go to heaven?

If there is such a future, such a place - I'm with the Apostle Paul - "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

And God said, "To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life."

Prayer: I want the reality of such a place to be so clear in our minds and hearts that it shapes us today.

Service ends with duet