

## A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH Revelation 21

We've spent the last 6 months we've been studying the book of Revelation and before that we studied the book of Genesis. Believe it or not, there is rhyme to my reason. As the first and last books of the Bible, Genesis and Revelation are book-ends to the biblical story. Not only do they tell us where we came from and where we're going, but they also are necessary to interpret one another. In other words, I would I would say it's impossible to fully understand Genesis without having read Revelation and the reverse is also true- you can't understand Revelation without a thorough reading of Genesis.

Genesis starts with the story of God creating an earth where He puts many good things and then puts a man on the earth in order to continue God's work of cultivating and having dominion over the earth. Of course, we know that the man, with the help of a fine woman, does well for a little while, but then he ultimately fails. And sin enters the world. And man and God have had to deal with sin ever since. And from the rest of Scripture, we learn how God has dealt with sin in putting it to death through the death of His own Son.

But, what happened to that first task Adam had of cultivating and having dominion over the earth? Most Christians skip over that question, they're content to talk about personal salvation, which is a good thing, but not the whole gospel. We must go back to this question of what happened to the original command God gave Adam to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth because it's a major interpretive clue to understanding the last 2 chapters of Revelation.

We know that when Adam and Eve sinned, they brought curses on themselves, but they also brought a curse on the earth itself. The Apostle Paul says that "the creation was subjected to futility" and now is in "bondage to decay" and is waiting to be set free from its bondage and "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

What strange words Paul uses! Creation- the earth- is groaning in anticipation of being set free. He says it's like a mother groaning in anticipation of the birth of her child- from great pain to great joy. I think about the recent oil spill- I don't have to specify which one, everyone knows. And, without being political or overly mystical, I can imagine the earth groaning over the contamination of its waters. Or when forest fires destroy thousands of acres of forest in California. The creation is in bondage to decay. It's waiting to be set free from its present captivity.

But there's hope. Look at verse 5 here in our text, "Behold, I am making all things new." God has not forgotten His creation or His people. He is going to redeem all that He has made.

Now some people think that God is going to destroy the earth. After all, it says here that there's a new heaven and a new earth because "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." But what's it's talking about is the way of the old earth, its power structures and its oppressive rulers. It's not talking about the actual physical creation. In 2 Peter we're told that 'the earth and the works done on it will be purified/exposed.' All that is impure, that is sinfully rebellious against God will be wiped out.

But notice God doesn't say, "I am making *all new things*." He says, "I am making *all things new*." There will be discontinuity between this life and the next, but there will also be much continuity between the two.

One of my favorite books from my all-time favorite series of books is *The Last Battle* from C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. It's the last book in the series and the characters in the story find themselves having passed through death, but finding that they're in a place that's completely familiar. Lewis writes, "The difference between the old Narnia & the new Narnia was [that the new Narnia] was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more... Once you had eaten the fruit [in the new Narnia] all of the nicest things [in the old Narnia] would taste like medicines after that."

Everything is more real, more alive, more **true**.

The Christian vision of eternity does not have us just sitting on clouds strumming harps trying not to be bored. The Christian vision says that we will have glorified bodies in a glorified creation. Everything you ever wanted this world to be like- the new earth will be that and so much more. And at the center of this picture is a city- the new Jerusalem where God's throne will be.

Again, back to Genesis- in Genesis 11 the people of the earth tried to build a tower up to heaven, to join heaven and earth. And then we read that God sees their plans and frustrates them. Why would God frustrate their plans? Is it because God doesn't want us building great things? No, the reason God was opposed to the building of the tower of Babel was because it was a reversal of the gospel. Because the gospel is not that man can work His way up to God, but that God must come and meet man in his sin and in his weakness.

That's why this image is so powerful. In verse 2 we read that the holy city God has prepared is coming down out of heaven to be joined to earth. *God is making His dwelling place with us*. The words of verse three, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" are a paraphrase of various verses in the Old Testament, which show the prophetic hope that God will come and make His home with His people. In the land. Where they live.

And this holy city has unique dimensions- we're told it's 12,000 stadia on each side and the walls are over 200 feet high. The picture we get is of a massive city- each wall is 1,400 miles long (that's the equivalent of 12,000 stadia- I had to look it up). To get a feel for how big these dimensions are, 1,400 miles would be you starting in Houston, TX and driving all the way to San Diego, CA (on the border of Mexico). Then from San Diego you drive all the way up into Canada, to Vancouver, BC. Then from Vancouver go across to Bismarck, ND. And finally, make your way from Bismarck back down to Houston. This is not a little village- this is a magnificent city worthy of the glory and majesty of God.

And in this city there is complete protection from everything we fear in our cities today. Let me just mention a few of them.

### *Bad health*

There will be no pain and no death in that place.

The biggest clue we get as to what life will be like in the eternal city is the glorified body of Jesus after the resurrection. Jesus was able to walk through walls, but He also ate food with the disciples and showed them the nail marks in His hands. That's a pretty awesome picture- we'll have our bodies but they will be perfect. Everything you ever wanted your body to do, they'll be able to do- without the pain, without the effects of aging.

There'll never be a prayer list in heaven. How many people have we prayed for with cancer, ulcerative colitis, diabetes, Alzheimer's...? Pray those prayers now, because you won't then. We will have complete health for eternity.

### *Bad elements*

There's a phrase in verse 1 that's always puzzled me- 'the sea was no more.' No sea? But I like the sea. I love to go out on a boat and just look out on the water, or sit on the beach or play in the surf. But, to understand this image, you have to understand how ancient people thought about the sea. They associated it with death and violence. After all, it was a flood that destroyed the world in Noah's time. At that time, there was uncertainty about where the earth ended- they didn't have our modern maps that basically tell you where everything (except the island in *Lost*) is. The sea might go on for a very long time once you left known land. The sea represented a lot of mystery and a lot of unpredictability, not to mention terrible sea creatures.

So God is telling His persecuted church in the 1<sup>st</sup> century- not only will you not have plagues and diseases to worry about, you won't have unpredictable weather to worry about. The elements will be peaceful and will be hospitable to you. There will be no hurricanes. There will be no tsunamis. There will be no challenges to God's created order.

All those folks who hold up signs that say 'Peace on earth'? In the new heavens and the new earth, there will be complete peace on earth. There will be no war, no crime- only complete human flourishing.

### *Bad people*

If you look at a map, you notice that Israel is a tiny country at the crossroads of a lot of greater countries. This was very strategic for Israel to have a cultural impact on the nations around it. But it was also very dangerous, as it was open to attack from many sides. And in the Old Testament, Israel is at war with its neighbors a lot. There was always fear that some new army was going to march into Jerusalem and take the people into captivity. In fact, if you visit Jerusalem now, the guides tell you how many levels there are, indicating how many times the city has been destroyed and rebuilt.

But in this new Jerusalem- there will be no fear. There will be no dangerous enemies who can come in the middle of the night and kill all the men and take all the women and children.

Verse 8 reminds us that not everyone will be brought into this holy city, to be saved. It says, "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Now, if you read this, you might be tempted to think- well, there you go, I always knew the bad people went to hell, and the good people went to heaven. But, notice- who

is it that gets into the city of God? Verse 6 tells us- “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.” The thirsty. Those who cannot pay, those who can’t pay for their drink, those who can’t earn their entrance into the city of God. Not the courageous and strong and morally virtuous people. Because there are no morally virtuous people. We’re all cowardly, we’re all faithless, we’re all idolaters.

But, the difference between a saved and a damned person is that the saved person knows their need and they’ve found the only One who can quench their thirst.

And if you’re a Christian, you don’t have any of those identities anymore! You’ve been given a new identity. Your identity is now wrapped up in Christ- because His righteousness is credited to your account and your sin was dealt with on the cross and not counted against you. You cannot now be known as any of those things, none of those titles applies anymore. When God looks at you, He will never say, “There’s a faithless person, there’s a cowardly idolater.” No, He will say, “There’s my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

So, how does this vision of eternity transform us right now? How does this future hope make any difference in the way we live here and now?

1. This future hope tells us that we can make meaningful culture.

I don’t know what God is going to preserve from this world, but it seems pretty clear that the new heavens and the new earth will not just go back to being nature- grass and trees and lakes and rivers. Genesis 1 has a garden, but Revelation 21 has a city. That’s the progress of the biblical story. What happened? *We cultivated the earth*. Just as Adam was supposed to cultivate the earth, now in Jesus we truly can.

Many aspects of human progress and development are good. Not all, obviously, are good; there are many things that humanity has made that have led to the loss of life and the loss of freedom. But the cultural mandate means that we shouldn’t be talking about just ‘going back to nature’ as if civilization is an evil thing. No, human culture in the midst of nature is a blend that God intended- just as we’re going to learn in Revelation 22 that there’s a garden and a river in the midst of this city.

Look at verses 24 and 26, “the kings of the earth will bring their glory into [the city]... They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” What is the glory of the nations? It would seem to be the best things that human culture has produced. The music of Bach and Miles Davis. The art of Rembrandt and Van Gogh. The architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Will there be cars and bridges and computers in the eternal city? I don’t know. But I do know that nothing of genuine value will be lost.

And so what you do and what we make in this life is important. It will not be destroyed; it will be glorified and purified in the new earth. Those of you who have jobs where you create things like technology or art or houses- don’t think that your work is inferior to pastors and missionaries. God has called you to make culture and He’ll honor it.

2. We can have true ‘newness.’

If you are in relationship with God, you are becoming new. This is the opposite of how nature works. In nature, we constantly become older. My wife and I have noticed that in the last few years we’ve started getting grey hairs.

I'm getting old. We all are. Even a newborn baby gets older every hour and every day it lives. We're all creeping closer and closer to decay and death here. But if your life is in Christ, everything is reversed. You're getting newer and newer every moment.

“Behold I'm making all things new.”

Friends, are you setting your hope on a glorious future in the city of God? See, most people think only about what they can do and get out of this life. 70, 80 years, maybe 90 if you don't smoke, and that's it. But when you realize that this moment is part of a life that will go on forever, it should change your perspective. If you don't get to visit Paris or Rome in this lifetime? Don't worry, there will be a glorified Paris and Rome in eternity.

But greater than all creation is what is at the center of the city. God on His throne. And it's that God to which I call you to worship. And it's that God who is now represented before us in the Lord's Supper...