

## A New Heaven and a New Earth

Our Bibles begin with a simple statement of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." As the Bible comes to a conclusion, we read that John has a final vision: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband." (Rev. 21:1,2) The story begins with creation and it ends with a new creation. But the new creation is not the same as the old. Let's look at the differences.

The sea is gone. That doesn't mean that there's no water in heaven, but the Bible portrays the sea as the ancients saw it, the force of chaos, always trying to suck the world back into the void. The sea was the place of storms and shipwrecks, the source of things that threaten our security.

In heaven there is no chaos, no typhoons or hurricanes, no destructive tsunamis, no earthquakes or volcanoes. The chaotic elements of life on earth, including all human acts of violence and destruction, won't appear in heaven. "And the sea was also gone."

In verse 4 we read about some more things that don't make an appearance in this new creation. Verse three sets the stage for it by explaining why these things won't be part of the new order:

*I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, "Look, the home of God is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever." (21:3,4)*

Where God makes His home, there is no death, no sorrow, no crying and no pain. The door will be closed on the old world and the things that cause us grief and struggle. God's presence is the presence of infinite goodness and love. There is no place there where He allows for the things that cause sorrow and crying and pain. And there is no room in the presence of the giver of life for death and disease and deterioration. Where our good Father is reigning, there will only be life and joy and peace.

In verse 8 we read about some other things that won't be in the new heaven and new earth: the character traits of Babylon:

*But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake ... (21:8)*

That's a bit intimidating. Who has never felt cowardly or has never failed to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth? John begins and ends this section by shining a searching light on those who deny that Jesus is the Son of God, in order to save their skin. These are the people he is referring to as the "cowardly", who cozy up to the

powers that be in order to not stand out as different, and the “liars”, those who refuse to acknowledge that Jesus is who He claimed to be - they say that He is something else, something not worthy of the worship of the nations. This is the lie that keeps a person outside the walls of the new Jerusalem, that results in judgment. Those who hold to such lies, who refuse to acknowledge Jesus, are not found in the new heaven and new earth.

In verse 22 we read about something else that is not found in the heavenly city -- there is no temple there:

*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 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. The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it ... On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. (21:22-27)*

No temple, no light from sun or moon, no night, nothing impure, shameful or deceitful. But why no temple? This would have been a shock to anyone who had read the prophecies of Ezekiel about the temple in chapters 40-48, or to anyone steeped in the religious hopes that had been fostered through the years of Old Testament history.

But notice something here: the dimensions of the New Jerusalem. It is built in a square, according to John's description in verse 16, and its dimensions are 12,000 stadia. Revelation's numbers are symbols, so we should not waste time trying to convert stadia to kilometres. 12 is one of the perfect numbers and the thousand is 10 x 10 x 10, again, indicating a really big number, a number that is big enough to contain all the people of God. Just like the 144,000 was a number too big to count, but representative of the people of all nations who worship the Lamb and are sealed by Him, so the 12,000 stadia is a measurement beyond being the physical dimensions, a huge number, a symbolic number. But then, at the end of verse 16, we see that the square becomes a cube:

*He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length and as wide AND HIGH as it was long. (21:16)*

What is the significance of the cube? How would John's readers have understood these dimensions? What other important space was fashioned in a perfect cube? There is only one possibility: the holy of holies in the original temple. It was a perfect cube and that is what John's readers would have thought of as they read this passage. The whole of the new Jerusalem is sacred space because God is present everywhere.

The 12,000 stadia is another symbolic number, despite the fact that modern translators will put it in miles, like the New American Standard Bible that tells us that the New Jerusalem is 1500 miles by 1500 miles. Twelve is the number of God's people, whether representing the twelve tribes of Israel or the 12 apostles of the early

church. The thousand is, once again, 10 x 10 x 10, a number too big to count. Translating the symbol we see, once more, that John is describing something that is beyond measure, that the city of God is huge, with no shortage of space for all who love Him.

More things that won't be found in the heavenly city:

1. There are no closed gates. The city of God, with its 12 gates representing the 12 tribes of Israel, are not closed to Gentiles, to foreigners. The city of God is not only for the physical descendants of Abraham, but for all children of faith, as Paul explains in Galatians 3:26-29. God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, and now that promise is being fulfilled.

2. There is no longer any curse. Way back in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the ground was cursed. People had to work hard in order to make the ground bear its fruit. Relationships were cursed as men would seek to dominate, to 'rule over' women. Women suffered in childbirth. The whole of the human race moved from tranquil peace in the garden into a world of pain and struggle. In a few short weeks we will be singing this verse from "Joy to the World"; it speaks of the heavenly city that John saw:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.*

*He comes to make His blessing flow, far as the curse is found.*

The curse will be no more - not in the New Jerusalem.

And then we come to the last chapter of Scripture, and what do you think God wanted to put in this final chapter? What insight into who He is, or who we are, or what constitutes the path of wisdom, would He put at the conclusion of His Word? I mentioned a few weeks back that John some-times uses "mirror images" or repeated brackets around something he wants to emphasize. And there's a hugely important mirror in the book of Revelation. Let's go back to chapter 1:

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (1:8)*

Then John sees someone "like a son of man" who tells John:

*"I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (1:17,18)*

Race past all the visions and arrive at chapter 21, vv. 5,6:

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then He said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."*

Who is seated on the throne? We had the lamb looking as if it had been killed, standing in the middle of the throne, but the only being pictured as seated on the throne in this book is the Lord God Almighty.

Now, we move on into the last chapter, starting with v. 12:

*"Behold I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and*

*the Last, the Beginning and the End.” (22:12,13)*

Who is coming soon? The only being referred to as coming back to earth is Jesus. And, just in case there was any doubt at all as to who is saying this, we read down in v. 16:

*“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”*

So there are these brackets at the beginning and the end of Revelation which exalt Jesus to the highest place in the universe. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the glorious, triumphant Lord and God who once came to earth and was killed by His creation and who is coming again as Lord and Judge of the living and the dead.

Can you hear the undertones in this closing section? John is not saying in so many words, “Forget about Caesar and his power to punish you for your faith,” but that is the message. He is calling on the believers in Asia and throughout the world to be overcomers, to stand true to their faith, to be willing to endure suffering, because their King is coming.

Here’s another bracket. In the letters to the churches, Jesus gives to each church a promise, specifically directed to the one who overcomes. The call is clear. There is opposition, there is danger, there is temptation, but to the person who overcomes, who stays faithful to Jesus in the middle of those trials, there is also reward -- great reward. In chapter 21, right after saying that He is the Alpha and the Omega, God says this to John:

*To the one who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. The one who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be My child. (21:6b,7)*

This idea is carried forward in chapter 22 as Jesus says

*Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life. (22:14)*

This is a book about overcoming. We see that God has defeated the enemies of our souls -- dragon, demons and beasts from sea and earth -- and that He calls on those who believe in Him to be overcomers as well. He calls us to stand firm in our faith, not in awe of the things that evil power can accomplish, whether it’s the carnage that eight suicidal terrorists can accomplish in a few minutes on one night in Paris, or whether it’s the evil that the devil can inspire in university lecture halls, on radio talk shows or in political back rooms.

There’s also a really big bracket in this last chapter that mirrors something we read about in Genesis 2 where we find God planting a garden in the east, in Eden, a garden where He placed the first man and where He created the first women:

*In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (2:9)*

A little later we read God’s first command to a human being and it is to enjoy the

bounty of God's garden, but to abstain from one thing, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When the human couple violate that command and eat of the forbidden fruit, God banishes them from His garden:

*And Yahweh God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." (Genesis 3:22)*

The knowledge of evil, the experience of evil, is too much for us; to live eternally in an environment where evil flourishes would destroy us. So God removes from us the possibility of living forever -- it's an ironic mercy that death spares us from eternal suffering -- and God does so by preventing us from reaching the tree of life.

Fast forward to Revelation 22 and we finally encounter the tree of life once more.

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. (Revelation 22:1,2)*

I count it an incredible privilege to have you, through your giving to the Lord, set me apart to study God's Word and the learning of Christian and Jewish scholars through the years that have helped me understand the Scriptures. This is an amazing collection of writings, studied for centuries in minute detail, verse by verse, word by word, and there's no end to learning that comes from it. At the creation, in Genesis 2:7, we read about the beginning of human life on this earth:

*Yahweh God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

Life was first in God, who gave it to us, who breathed into us. Our ancestors chose to invite death to limit our experience of life on this earth and death ruled, as Paul puts it, from Adam until Christ. But in the resurrection of Jesus, death was beaten and what waits for us in heaven is the river of the water of life ... and the tree of life. This is the Greek word *zoe* (ζοε) rather than *bios* (βιοσ), a word that means fullness of life, life as God intended it, life that does not run down, wear out, get old and die. This is the ζοε of God, the abundant life that Jesus talked about and that He promised to us.

And the tree of life that God protected us from when it would have given us eternal knowledge of evil is now planted by the river of the water of life. There is no need for God to keep it from us any more, because evil has been dealt with, eliminated, and its shadow is removed.

As we've seen so many times, this book of Revelation is filled with echoes of the Old Testament. One of the most powerful takes us back to the time of Moses and his remarkable conversation with the living God on Mt. Sinai. God had just granted Moses' request that He would go with Israel, and take them into the Promised Land when Moses then said, "Now show me Your glory." And God's reply to Moses is very relevant to chapter 22:

*And Yahweh said, "I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My Name, Yahweh, in your presence . . . But ... you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live. (Ex. 33:19f)*

This is God when He has been laying out the laws that would govern Israelite national life, the laws that would direct the nation in their worship of Yahweh. But then you read these amazing words in Revelation 22:

*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His Name will be on their foreheads.  
(vv.3,4)*

Finally, the separation that came into the world so near its beginning will be ended. The God who has been so mysterious, the invisible God who reigns on high in a dimension we can't access, except through our prayers, will be there, will be visible; we will see His face, and His character will be written in our character. The things we want, the things we value, will be the things that are also on the heart of God. The end of separation caused by sin will open up a whole new relationship between the Creator and His servants ... us. We will know Him in a whole new way, and we will love Him far more than we do now.

And we will be His servants. Some think that heaven will be boring, that once the conflict between good and evil has been resolved that there will be nothing much to do. That's not a biblical picture; in fact it is radically different from what the Bible portrays as the nature of the ζοε of God. His is abundant life, life to the max, the life of overflow, of rich reward, of unending joy -- does that sound boring to you? We are told that we will have responsibilities -- what yours or mine will be, we don't know. But we know that we will serve God's purposes and we also know that He is incredibly creative -- what He has created or will create, we have no knowledge of yet, but we might be involved in some of it.

The final message of Revelation is Jesus' word to all of us through all the ages of church history, "I am coming soon." And the reply from John's pen? - "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (22:20) That's always our prayer because the world we live in carries such a great weight of pain until the Lord returns. In the meantime, we extend the invitation from verse 17 to a thirsty world, the same invitation Jesus gave on the last and greatest day of the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:37):

*Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev. 22:17)*

Our God is all about life, and all about satisfying the deep thirst in the human soul. That's why so many people through the ages have been willing to endure torture and death instead of denying the Lord Jesus ... because He brings life, He is life, He offers the free gift of the water of life to anyone who wants it. Our job is to live in the joy and freedom of Jesus to such a degree that we make people thirsty for the life we're enjoying.

That is probably the central point of this final book of the Bible -- that true life is

available to all who ask and it is worthy hanging on to, even in the face of death, because it will be ours forever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.