

The New Earth

By Brad Allison on 9/12/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 21-22*

We come today to the end, not only of the book of Revelation, but of the entire Bible. The two most important parts of any story are the beginning and the end. In the beginning themes are introduced, and in the end they are resolved. The Bible begins with the book of Genesis and its account of the creation of the world. It ends here with the establishment of the new heavens and earth, the place where God's people will spend eternity with him.

These chapters are of great interest to us because they describe our eternal home. There is a certain amount of curiosity we have about a future home. When our family moved from Baltimore to Birmingham eleven years ago, we were all curious about the kind of place we were going to be living in. We wanted to know about the city, the church, the house where we would be living, and any piece of information we could acquire.

This description of heaven is not just of interest to us because it satisfies our curiosity. Even more important, it gives us hope for the future. Remember that this book was written to a group of Christians who were suffering because of the gospel. If they were to persevere in following the Lord in such difficult circumstances, they would need hope for the future. Hope changes everything. Suppose you are an heir to the Bill Gates fortune. A \$100 million trust has been set up to which you will have full access when you reach 25 years of age. But now you're only 24, and someone just broke into your apartment and stole most of your stuff that was worth anything. Since you don't have any money in the bank, and since you can't get to your millions until you turn 25, it looks like for the next year you will be living very simply. In such a situation, would you be full of despair? Of course not. Your situation would be full of great hope, because in only a matter of months you will inherit vast riches. It is the same for God's people. Believing the truths outlined in this passage will provide us with great hope, even if our current circumstances are dreadful.

Illustration: Joni Eareckson was an athletic 17-year old when she dove into the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and severed her spinal cord, leading to a complete paralysis from the neck down. At first she fought against her paralysis, determined to walk again. But when there was no improvement over a long period of time, she came to the realization that her condition was permanent. She struggled with despair, and experienced what she called "rebellious temper tantrums against God." Eventually, though, she began to trust God, and He has led her into a very fruitful ministry to the disabled called "Joni and Friends." Her change from despair to hope occurred as she began to understand the Bible's teaching about the future. Here's how she says it in her own words.

I with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal cord-injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope (quoted in John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, p. 151).

The followers of Christ have a bright future. We're going to look at that today by looking at the description of the new earth that we see in these last two chapters of the Bible. I want us simply to look at two points: the nature of the new earth and the residents of the new earth.

I. The Nature of the New Earth

John has a habit of mixing his metaphors throughout this book, and he does so even more noticeably in these last two chapters. In describing heaven, he talks about it as a new earth, a new Jerusalem, the marriage of the Lamb, the new temple, the Garden of Eden, and several other images. We're not going to have time to explore all of these, but I would like for us to look at a couple of them. Notice first that he says he saw a new earth (v. 1). The central question about this new earth is whether it will be totally new or a renewal of the old earth. In other words, is the old earth going to be completely destroyed, after which the new earth will be completely created anew? Is it going to be a restoration job or a job where you tear it down and build something completely new? The answer you give to this is actually more important than you might think, because it goes a long way to determining how you regard this current earth.

For a variety of reasons, I think the Bible teaches that the new earth will be a renewal of the old earth, not a complete destruction and re-creation. First, the Greek language in which the New Testament was originally written has two words for "new". One of those, *neos*, means new in time or origin. But the word used in our text, *kainos*, means new in nature or in quality. So when this church building was built in 1983 after the former one was demolished, it was a *neos* building, new in origin. But if a friend loses 80 pounds and says, "I am a new man", he is new in the sense of *kainos*, new in nature. The word in verse 1 is the latter, *kainos*, indicating that this new earth has a great deal of continuity with the old earth. Romans 8:20-21 speaks similarly, saying that the creation is eagerly longing for the time when it "will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Note that it is the present creation that will be liberated, not a totally different creation. There is a helpful analogy for this in our resurrection bodies. Jesus' resurrection body had both continuity and discontinuity. The continuity can be seen in the fact that the scars on his hands and feet were still visible on his new body. But it was also different, allowing him to pass through walls. The new earth is the same. It is the same earth, not a completely new one, but an earth that has undergone a radical transformation and renewal.

What this means is that when Jesus returns, he will not completely destroy and then re-create a new world. Rather, he will bring fulfillment to the old world, making of it what it was always intended to be. There's a famous statement made by Martin Luther once when someone asked him what he would do if he knew Jesus would return tomorrow. He replied that he would plant a tree today. If you believed everything would be destroyed completely, planting a tree the day before Jesus returned would be like straightening pictures on the walls of the Titanic as it sunk into the Atlantic. But Luther didn't believe the tree would be destroyed the next day; he believed it would be fulfilled. It would become what a perfect tree was always supposed to be.

This has some significant implications to us. What it means is that everything we do on this earth is shot through with meaning. It's not just winning souls that has significance, but anything done in service to Jesus. The Christian view of work is that every work offered to God is holy, not just the preacher's sermon, but the teacher's lesson and the doctor's care for her patient. I think this is in view in Revelation 14:13, where we read of a blessing upon those who die in Christ, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" You see, your job isn't just a way for you to make money in order that you and your family can survive and so you can give to the church for the really important work. Rather, your job is a way of exercising dominion over the earth. Jesus has not and will not abandon his purpose to make of this earth a paradise upon which men and women worship him. I like the way Abraham

Kuyper said it a century ago.

If an endless field of human knowledge and of human ability is now being formed by all that takes place in order to make the visible world and material nature subject to us, and if we know that this dominion of ours over nature will be complete in eternity, we may conclude that the knowledge and dominion we have gained over nature here can and will be of continued significance, even in the kingdom of glory (in *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema, p. 286).

The difference I am talking about here is the difference between renting and owning. A few months ago I was staying in a hotel room in which the caulking had been removed from around the bathtub, with the result that water from the shower ran down behind the tub. I knew that water in such a space would do significant damage, but because I was only staying there for two nights, and because I would never see that room again, I didn't rush out to Home Depot to buy a tube of caulk and fix it. I was a renter and not an owner. We dare not trash this world, because we will be living in it for eternity. The change Jesus will bring about with the new earth isn't to throw away the current one and start all over again with another one. Rather, he will remove the curse from this one and transform it. So the application of this is to be filled with faith in all you do for Jesus. Even the smallest deed, done for Jesus and his glory, is filled with meaning.

There are several more images in these chapters, all from the Old Testament, that are used to describe heaven. It is the holy of holies in the temple, indicated by the dimensions of the city, which form a perfect cube. It is 12,000 stadia (about 1400 miles) long, wide and high. The holy of holies was a cube too, and it was the place where God lived. This city is now the same. Another image is the garden of Eden (22:1-5), containing the river of the water of life and the tree of life. If you've ever read the first few chapters of Genesis, you can't help but feel sorrowful at the concluding verse of chapter 3. "[God] drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." The story of the Bible is in large part the restoration of man's home in the garden. We were created for life in a garden, walking with God in the cool of the day. It is Jesus who has opened for us the way back into the garden.

II. The Residents of the New Earth

The last few paragraphs of the book form something of an epilogue, both to this book and to the entire Bible. One of the primary purposes of this epilogue is to warn those who may miss the new heaven and earth. I read that after former President Clinton's heart surgery this past week, clinics have been overwhelmed with people wanting to get their hearts checked out. No one learned anything new about the causes of heart disease as a result of Mr. Clinton's condition, but the need to eat right certainly became more real to them. There are several verses that serve to warn us of the danger of missing heaven. Let's do a self-diagnosis on our spiritual hearts to help us determine where we will spend eternity. There are three tests in this diagnostic.

Notice 22:18-19, which warns against either adding to or removing parts of God's word. Who would want to add to or subtract from God's word? Those who don't want to submit to it. To reserve for oneself the right to ignore the sections of the Bible you don't like is to make yourself a God. If you never let the Word of God challenge you and correct you, then you are telling God that he needs to move over and let you be God. One of the marks of the Christian is to listen to Jesus as he speaks to us in his word. For the follower of Christ, the ultimate question isn't whether we agree with Jesus or not, but only what Jesus has said. If he says it, we must not remove it from the Bible by ignoring it.

Here's a second test of our spiritual hearts. It's found back in 21:8, in that list of qualities in those who don't go to heaven. Notice the first one. "But as for the *cowardly*, the faithless, the detestable, ... their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." Does it seem odd to you that the cowardly are included in that list? Isn't that just a personality issue more than a faith or moral issue? Not according to God's word, which, you will remember from the previous point we must submit to completely, even the parts we have the hardest time with. How is cowardice a faith or moral issue? Because a cowardly heart reveals a lack of faith. People of faith believe that God is for them no matter what happens in life, and this gives them a tremendous courage. They have a core security about their past, present and future lives that is not based at all on their performance. Rather, it is based on the rock solid performance of Jesus, who lived and died for them. Annie Dillard says it like this:

There is always the temptation in life to diddle around making itty-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for years on end. It is all so self-conscious, so apparently moral... I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, ... more dangerous... more extravagant and bright... We are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 258).

The final item in our spiritual heart test is indicated by the last verse of the Bible. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" It all ends with a statement about the grace of God. Will your life end with the grace of God, with a deep sense that God has been gracious to you? Only those who magnify the grace of God by depending upon it for everything will be in heaven. Do you depend on God's grace for heaven? Or are you like a neighbor to whom I once attempted to explain the grace of God? When I asked him on what he was basing his hope of heaven, he replied, "I'm the nicest guy I know, and if God doesn't want me in his heaven, then I don't want to be there." There will be no one in heaven who hasn't tasted and experienced the grace of God.

CONCLUSION:

Joni Eareckson is one who has experienced that grace. She once described a Christian conference she attended at which the speaker, at the conclusion of his message, asked the audience to kneel for prayer. Joni, of course, could not do so, and she just watched as others did. For some reason, her disability was more powerfully before her at that moment than it usually was, and she couldn't stop herself from crying. She had been brought up in a Reformed Episcopal Church and had been accustomed to kneeling. Then she remembered heaven.

Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick and do aerobics. And although I'm sure Jesus will be delighted to watch me rise on tiptoe, there's something I plan to do that may please him more. If possible, somewhere, sometime before the party gets going, sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus (Stott, p. 152-53).

Will you drop on grateful knees to worship at the feet of Jesus? I pray that it may be so. May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all! Amen.