

WHAT WILL FUTURE HEAVEN BE LIKE?

REVELATION 21 and 22

It's interesting to contrast what most people assume about Heaven with what the Bible says about Heaven. The assumption is that Heaven is non-physical. The Bible says Heaven will be a physical place. The assumption is that you will be a disembodied spirit. The Bible says that you will spend eternity in a resurrected body. The assumption is that Heaven will be boring. The Bible says Heaven will be fascinating. You will worship God, serve Him in mind boggling ways, help to rule the universe and enjoy relationships with God and others. The assumption is that Heaven will mean the absence of bad stuff, but the presence of little that we desire. The Bible suggests Heaven will mean the presence of all we desire and nothing we don't. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian thinker, wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

A quick review. We're in the midst of a series of messages entitled *Heaven: A Restored Place for Redeemed People*. The Bible uses the word "heaven" in four different ways. "Heaven" can refer to the literal atmosphere that we breathe. It can refer to the physical universe: sun, moon, stars and outer space. The third use of "heaven" is what we might call present Heaven. This is where people who have been born again by God's Spirit go after they die. It's God's physical, wonderful but temporary place. The Bible makes it clear that there is a fourth use of the word "heaven" and it refers to what might be called future Heaven. When you die, will you be with Jesus forever? Absolutely, yes. Will you live in present Heaven forever? No, you won't. Present Heaven is an intermediate and temporary place of great rest, joy and refreshment for all those who trust in Jesus. But the ultimate and final destination of every follower of Jesus is future Heaven, or as the Bible calls it – "the New Heavens and the New Earth." What will this future Heaven be like? That's what we want to explore this morning. I'd like to do so by asking and trying to answer two questions. First:

WHEN WILL FUTURE HEAVEN BEGIN?

I've adapted a graph I discovered in my study on Heaven that I hope will be helpful to you. The Bible teaches that you go to present Heaven the moment you die. You will remain there in the presence of Jesus and other believers who have died for an undetermined period of time. But certain events will mark your transition from present Heaven to future Heaven.

Future Heaven will begin, first of all, after the Second Coming of Jesus. The Bible says, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever." (1Th 4:16-17 NLT) This is the event more than any other that separates

present Heaven and present Earth from the new Heaven and the new Earth. By the way, the Greek word for “coming” – *parousia* – referred to the coming of a king to a portion of his kingdom. The citizens would go out and greet their king and welcome him to their town or city. When Jesus returns we are not going to go up and disappear into some kind of ethereal, otherworldly Heaven. We are going to meet and welcome King Jesus back to reign forever on the New Earth.

Future Heaven will begin, secondly, after our earthly bodies have been raised from the dead and we are given new resurrected bodies. The Bible says, “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves.” (1 Th 4:16 NLT) The Bible also says. “But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back.” (1 Cor 15:23 NLT) We’re going to explore more of what the Bible says about our resurrected, physical bodies in a couple of weeks from now. It’s important to know now, however, that this event precedes future Heaven.

Future Heaven will begin, thirdly, after any Millennium. This refers to the teaching that there will be a literal 1,000 year (that’s where the word “millennium” comes from) reign of Jesus on the Earth at some point in the future. This has been a subject of much debate among godly, Bible-believing Christians for centuries. Some hold a postmillennial viewpoint which is the belief that the Kingdom of God will gradually spread throughout the world and eventually dominate this planet for a long time. Then Jesus will return to an already substantially redeemed world. Future Heaven will begin at some point after Jesus returns. The premillennial viewpoint teaches a literal 1,000 year reign of Jesus on the earth after His second coming and then future Heaven will begin after a final rebellion of Satan. Then there is an amillennial viewpoint which doesn’t believe in any literal Millennium as such, but does hold to a future and literal new Heaven and new Earth at the return of Jesus. As you probably know, there are all sorts of variations within these three positions which we are not going to get into today! But here’s what is important to know today. Whether you believe in a literal Millennium or not and whenever you think a Millennium might happen in God’s plan, all of us can agree that a future Heaven will begin after any Millennium.

Finally, future Heaven will begin after the last judgment. When you die, you face a kind of judgment which might be called the judgment of faith. The outcome of that judgment determines whether you’ll go to present Heaven or present Hell. That judgment doesn’t depend on your good deeds or how morally you’ve lived, but rather on where you have placed your faith when it comes to having a relationship with God. Have you put your trust in Jesus alone and what He did at the cross and the empty tomb, or did you trust in yourself or in something else?

That first judgment must not be confused with the last judgment. The last judgment has two aspects. Those who are already in Hell will face a last

judgment where they will be finally consigned to eternity without God. But even for believers there is a last judgment that's sometimes called the judgment of rewards or the judgment of works. The Bible says, "For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body." (2 Cor 5:10 NLT) Your deeds don't affect your salvation or where you spend eternity, but they will affect your rewards in future Heaven. When will this last judgment take place? Both scripture and logic indicate that it will occur sometime before future Heaven begins. Now, we're ready to ask a second question:

WHAT WILL CHARACTERIZE FUTURE HEAVEN?

The best biblical description of future Heaven is right where you'd expect it to be: the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22. Now, one of the great questions that Christians have struggled with over the years is how much of these chapters to interpret literally or figuratively. The fact is that no one interprets the Bible either absolutely literally or figuratively. You must be aware of things like context or the kind of writing being used. For instance, the book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature which does rely heavily on symbolism and imagery. But it's a mistake to consider everything in these chapters as symbolic or figurative. Again, we have to be careful we don't slip into old Greek philosophy that whatever is material or physical is bad or not worth much while whatever is spiritual and non-literal is good and better. That's the teaching of Plato not the Bible!

Indeed, the first thing we can say about future Heaven is that it will combine the physical and the spiritual. What we read depicts a place where God Himself will be literally present so, obviously, that takes care of the spiritual aspect of our future home. But don't overlook the physicality of future Heaven. There is nothing figurative, airy, symbolic or abstract about our eternal home. After all, we will have literal, physical, resurrected bodies. We will need to be in a physical place. Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (John 14:1-3 NLT) I believe Jesus was referring to future Heaven there rather than present Heaven. Jesus implies future Heaven isn't completed yet. Much as God literally planned, built and prepared the first Eden for Adam and Eve, God is planning, building and preparing future Heaven for His children.

Secondly, future Heaven will combine Heaven and Earth. An incredible merger is ahead of us! That's the clear message of Revelation 21 and 22. The picture is not of disembodied spirits making their way up to a non-material Heaven, but rather of a physical Heaven coming down and being united to a physical Earth. God made both Heaven and Earth; they apparently exist right now in different dimensions. One day He will remake both of them and then join them together

forever in the same dimension. Future Heaven is simply another word for the New Heaven and the New Earth. Heaven is God's home. Earth is our home. God will make Earth into Heaven and Heaven into Earth. You will be in Heaven as you continue to live on the Earth. Pastor and author, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, put it succinctly, "... what we call heaven is life in this perfect world as God intended humanity to live it." Jesus as the unique God-man forever links both Heaven and Earth. What does the Bible say? "And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth." (Eph 1:10 NLT) That's true in a spiritual, physical and literal sense. That's true in every sense something can be true.

Future Heaven, thirdly, will combine the old and the new. Did you know the Greek word for "new" – *kainos* – when it refers to the "new" Heaven and the "new" Earth, doesn't mean the emergence of something totally different but rather taking something and renewing it? The Bible says, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new (*kainos*) person. The old life is gone; a new (*kainos*) life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT) That's referring to conversion or becoming born again spiritually. When that happens to you, God doesn't destroy the old you, does He? If you like ice cream and jazz before you become a Christian, you still like ice cream and jazz even after you become a follower of Jesus. You look the same physically after you become a Christian as you did before you became one. But you are indeed a new person because now your sins are forgiven, the Holy Spirit is living within you and Heaven is your eternal home. Once you become a follower of Jesus, you are a mixture of the old person you were and the new person you are becoming. There is continuity and connection between the old you and the new you – "redemptive continuity".

That's how God does things. God doesn't scrap the original you and start over. Instead, He takes you in all of your sin and restores and renews you to your original design. Apply that same principle to yourself in future Heaven. You will still be John or Mary or Bob or Sue in a new, resurrected body that will likely have some kind of continuity with your present body. You will be a mixture of the person you are now and the person you will become. The Bible says, "For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies." (1 Cor 15:53 NLT)

Now apply that principle to future Heaven itself. The Bible does teach that there will be a kind of temporary destruction of the present Earth and physical universe that results in reconstruction. It says, "But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.... On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness." (2 Pt 3:10,12 NLT) There will be continuity between present Heaven and the new Heaven and between present Earth and

the new Earth. It will be a mixture of the old and the new. I like how pastor and author, John Piper, puts it, “What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together.... Our bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And so it is with the heavens and the earth.”

Fourthly, future heaven will combine a world and a city. I believe that the Bible teaches that future Heaven is one and the same with a new Earth – a new, physical, literal world with continuity and connection to this world. I also believe the Bible teaches that future Heaven will be dominated by a literal, physical city that the Bible calls the New Jerusalem. We read about it this morning in Revelation 21. Now some people say, “Why, that can’t be literal! It’s called ‘the bride of Christ’ there in Rev. 21:9 so it’s only symbolic of the Church or of Christians.” But why can’t it be literal? And why can’t something be both symbolic and literal? My wedding ring is a symbol of my marriage to Cheryl, but it’s a literal, physical object, too.

Elsewhere in the Bible, future Heaven is described as both a country and a city. In Hebrews 11 the author is talking about what God’s people have longed for. He says, “All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Heb 11:13-16 NLT) It also says, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” (Heb 13:14 NIV) I don’t know of any interpretative principle that requires me to think that is only symbolic language.

With that in mind it’s exciting and mind boggling to think about this New Jerusalem. Again, if we have physical bodies in future Heaven we need a physical environment in which to live. This city is described as a structure that is approximately 1400 miles wide, 1400 miles long and 1400 miles high – a cube. Such a city would take up about two-thirds of the continental United States in just its length and width. The 1400 miles high dimension (our present Earth’s atmosphere is only 100 miles high) would make it an immense, colossal city more than capable of housing every child of God who has ever lived with room to spare. This city has walls some 200 feet thick. Of course, the walls are symbolic of God’s invulnerability. But why can’t this literal city have literal walls, too? This city has twelve gates that suggest we can go in and out of this city. It will be our home as God’s people but we won’t be confined there.

John, the author of Revelation, goes on to describe there in Revelation 21 a city that shines brilliantly... has twelve foundations made out of precious stones... has twelve gates made out of pearl... has streets made of pure gold. It describes a city with a great river that runs through it and trees bearing all sorts of fruit. Of

course, all of those images have symbolic and spiritual meaning, but is there any reason they can't also be literal? What John suggests is a city full of incredible and immense beauty – both natural beauty and designed beauty. God has put within you and me a love for beauty. The beauty of future Heaven will surpass anything we have experienced yet and will satisfy that love of beauty forever.

Our study of Heaven in coming weeks will be primarily a study of future Heaven, but I wanted to set the stage this morning and hopefully whet your appetite for what's ahead. But let me close this morning by underlining again how all of this might differ drastically from the traditional view of Heaven that you've picked up along the way. The traditional view of Heaven is that because of human sin poor, weak God had to abandon His original plan, destroy this world at some point as a failed experiment and then take disembodied creatures to live with Him to a boring, otherworldly environment where we float around on clouds and sing hymns and choruses forever. But God will not surrender this Earth to the trash heap. Earth is not disposable. Furthermore, God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. The climax of God's plan is the creation of future Heaven – the New Heaven and the New Earth. That's why He sent Jesus into the world. That's why Jesus died and rose again. God became a real, literal human in order to redeem real, literal human beings who live on a real, literal world. I love how Peter put it in the book of Acts, "He (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." (Ac 3:21 NIV)

Recently, Harry Adams, his wife and daughter were reading Psalm 37. Verse four says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." Harry asked if this was true for him. Harry Adams is crippled by Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS, which is a progressive and fatal neurological illness. In the years Harry has had ALS, it's taken his voice and robbed him of the use of his limbs. It also forced his family out of their lovely home. Is the promise of fulfilled desires true for Harry and for the millions of other believers who have had their plans and dreams shattered? Harry says, "Yes, it's true—exceedingly so." He desires a healthy body, and Jesus promises Harry a body that is powerful, incorruptible, glorious, and spiritual. He desires a home that is beautiful and spacious, and God is preparing and building such a home for Harry. Harry desires a world without crime, lies, or violence, and God promises him a world where righteousness dwells. Harry desires to be with those he loves, and God promises that Harry will be with them forever. Harry desires an end to his sorrow, and God promises him fullness of joy in God's presence. Harry desires a heart so filled with love that there is no room for sin, and God promises to make him like Jesus when Harry is in Heaven. Harry desires a ministry, and God promises that Harry will serve Him eternally. Harry desires a voice with which to praise God, and God promises Harry that he will sing before His throne. Most of all, Harry desires to see God, and God promises Harry that he will always behold His face. God will keep His promise to give Harry the desires of his heart. And what God promises Harry, He also promises to you, to me and to all His children.