

WHAT ARE THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH? REVELATION 21:1-22:5

“We cannot understand biblical revelation, human history, or the events of our own lives if we don’t grasp God’s plan for the new heavens and the new earth.” (Herman Ridderbos) Many evangelical Christians in the last 50 years – I’ve lived those years so I know – have been all but obsessed with the second coming of Jesus. There’s no end of books, movies, DVDs, blogs, and websites – many of them ridiculous and fanciful - about such subjects as the Antichrist, events in the middle East that are supposed to fulfill biblical prophecy, the Rapture and the Millennium. Now the second coming of Jesus is an important doctrine – I certainly believe in it – but the Bible puts far more emphasis on what will happen after the second coming – the creation of the new Heavens and the new Earth. We’ve been on a ten message journey considering what the Bible says about the last days or the end times. Today’s the last message in that series. I want you to know that the ultimate goal of the last days is not the second coming of Jesus or the Millennium. It is the creation of a new Heaven and a new Earth by God Himself. This is where every follower of Jesus past, present, and future is going to spend eternity. God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. Let’s read about it just now.

It’s interesting to contrast what most people assume about our eternal home with what the Bible says about it. The assumption is that the new Heavens and new Earth will be non-physical. The Bible says it will be a physical, literal 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 your eternal home will be nice but kind of boring. The Bible implies that the new Heavens and the new Earth will be fascinating. You will worship God, serve Him in mind boggling ways, help to rule the universe and enjoy an eternal relationship with Jesus and His followers.

The assumption is that your eternal home will mean the absence of bad stuff, but the presence of little that you really desire or look forward to. The Bible says this about Satan: “And he spoke terrible words of blasphemy against God, slandering his name and his dwelling—that is, those who dwell in heaven.” (Revelation 13:6 NLT) That verse tells me that Satan slanders three things: God’s Person, God’s people and God’s place. Think about it. Satan has every reason to spread the lie that your eternal home is a dull, boring, unappealing place. That would rob you of any joy and anticipation when you think about it. You’d be content just to set your mind on this world instead. Why even share your faith if you’re not sure you want to live forever in the new Heavens and the new Earth? Instead, the Bible suggests Heaven will mean the presence of everything good 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.” Indeed, you are! Here’s the first question to ask and answer:

WHEN WILL THE NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH BEGIN?

Whenever the Bible talks about “Earth” it means this physical, literal planet. But, the Bible uses the word “Heaven” in four different ways. “Heaven” can refer to the literal atmosphere that we breathe. It can refer, secondly, 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 a wonderful, but a temporary place. 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. You will remain there in the presence of Jesus and other believers who have died for an undetermined period of time.

The Bible makes it clear that there is a fourth use of the word “Heaven” which refers to the new Heavens and the New Earth. You might think of it as future Heaven. “Future Heaven” is simply other words for “the new Heavens and the new Earth”. They’re one and the same. Clearly, the Bible distinguishes between a present Heavens and Earth and a future Heavens and Earth. How else can you interpret these verses? God said through the prophet, Isaiah, “Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.” (Isaiah 65:17 NLT) The Bible also says, “But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised.... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.” (2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1 NLT)

The Bible teaches that you go to present Heaven the moment you die. Certain events will mark your transition from present Heaven to the new Heavens and the new Earth or future Heaven. The new Heavens and new Earth 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 Earth from the new Heavens and 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.

The new Heavens and the new Earth 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)

The new Heavens and the new Earth 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. You might recall that there are four major theological viewpoints on the last days. You will find people who love Jesus and have a high view of Scripture in all four camps. There are two kinds of premillennial positions: dispensational and historic. Most evangelical Christians are premillennialists. The word "premillennial" means that those who hold that position believe Jesus will return before (pre) a 1,000 year literal reign of Jesus as King on the Earth as we know it today. Premillennialists believe that the new Heavens and new Earth will begin after the Millennium. Postmillennialism teaches that Jesus will return again after (post) a very long golden age – perhaps literally 1,000 years – of dominance by followers of Jesus on the Earth as we know it today. Postmillennialists believe the new Heavens and the new Earth will begin after this millennial period of time. Amillennialists – of which I am one – don't believe that Scripture requires belief in a literal Millennium. We simply believe that the new Heavens and the new Earth will begin after the second coming of Jesus period. 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 the new Heavens and new Earth will begin after any Millennium.

Finally, the new Heavens and the new Earth will begin after the final judgment. We considered that subject last week. 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) However, that final judgement will be very different for followers of Jesus in this life than for those who rejected Jesus. The final judgment for followers of Jesus will not be about determining your eternal destination. Hell and eternal death is not an option for you, because Jesus suffered your punishment of hell and eternal death on the cross some 2,000 years ago. The final judgment for followers of Jesus will be about your eternal rewards in the new Heavens and the new Earth. For those who rejected Jesus in this life, however, the final judgment will mean consignment to Hell forever – eternal existence in a place where all those who want nothing to do with God get exactly what they want – eternity without God. Now, let's ask and try to answer a second question...

WHAT WILL THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH BE LIKE?

We've read this morning in Revelation 21 and 22 the best biblical description of the new Heavens and the new Earth. One of the great questions that Christians have struggled with over the years is how much of those chapters to interpret literally or figuratively. The fact is that no one interprets the Bible either absolutely literally or figuratively. You have to consider the context and 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 conclude that just because John uses lots of symbolism and imagery that what he's talking about isn't literal or physical.

The first thing we can say about the new Heavens and the new Earth is that they will perfectly combine the physical and the spiritual. What we read earlier today 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. 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) Jesus might actually be referring there to the new Heavens and new Earth – future Heaven - rather than present Heaven. Jesus hints that this Heaven isn't completed yet, doesn't He? 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.

Again, the new Heavens and the new Earth will be a literal, physical place. 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. The place where followers of Jesus are going to spend eternity is identified as 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 verse 9 so it's only symbolic of the Church or of Christians." But why can't it be literal? Why can't something be both symbolic and literal? After all, we will have literal, physical, resurrected bodies. We will need to occupy a physical place and space of some kind. Sure, the New Jerusalem has all kinds of symbolic imagery attached to it. But it's fun to use your imagination and wonder if God allowed John to see something of the physicality of our eternal home.

This city he described is a structure that's 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 goes on to describe 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 meanings, but is there any reason they can't point to a partially literal description? What John suggests is a physical place 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 the new Heavens and the new Earth will surpass anything we have experienced yet.

Secondly, the new Heavens and the new Earth will combine both Heaven and Earth into one, new entity. An incredible merger is ahead of us! That's the clear message of Revelation 21 and 22. The picture isn't 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. Present Heaven is likely in another dimension of reality altogether. If this sounds preposterous and “unscientific” to you, please know that scientists at Yale, Princeton and Stanford among others theorize that there are at least ten unobservable dimensions and likely an infinite number of universes we can’t perceive. But, one day God will remake Heaven and Earth and then join them together forever in the same dimension. Heaven is God’s home. Earth is our home. God will make Earth into Heaven and Heaven into Earth. Think of it! 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.” Hear again what the Bible says. “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 every spiritual, physical and literal sense imaginable.

The new Heavens and the new Earth, thirdly, will combine the old and the new. Here’s a phrase worth remembering: “redemptive continuity.” 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’re a mixture of the old person you were and the new person you’re becoming. There is continuity and connection between the old you and the new you or “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 the new Heavens and the new Earth. 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) That’s redemptive continuity.

Now apply that principle to the new Heavens and the new Earth. 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."

The traditional view of Heaven is that because of human sin poor, weak, defeated God had to abandon His original plan, destroy this world at some point as a horribly failed experiment, and then take disembodied creatures to live with Him to a boring, otherworldly environment where we, with angel wings attached, float around on clouds singing hymns and choruses accompanied by harps forever! But God will not surrender this Earth to the trash heap. This Earth is not disposable. Furthermore, God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. "I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.' ... And they will reign forever and ever." (Rev 21:3, 22:5 NLT) That's why God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world. That's why Jesus died and rose again. God became a real, literal human being 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." (Acts 3:21 NIV)

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped into the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She was already the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was chilly and foggy. It was hard to see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam for fifteen hours. Florence begged to be taken out of the water along the way even though her mother, in a boat alongside of her, told her she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn't until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore – the California coastline - was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day, she said, "All I could see was the fog.... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

"I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it." For every follower of Jesus, the shore is Jesus Himself and being with Him in a place that He has prepared for us and where we will live with Him forever – the New Heavens and the New Earth. That is the ultimate goal. If you can keep your eye on your eternal home then despite the fog of life today, the Holy Spirit will comfort you, energize you, inspire you and encourage you every stroke and every step along your journey home.