

“Then I Saw a New Heaven and Earth”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 30

Texts: Revelation 21:1-22:5; Isaiah 65:17-25

As the Book of Revelation progressively unfolds, the apostle John gives us a panoramic vision of the history of redemption. He has taken us from the coming of the Messiah all the way to the end of the age. But after describing the final judgment in Revelation 20:11-15, in the final two chapters of this great book, John now gives us a glimpse of the New Jerusalem and the so-called eternal state. What is described here is what we commonly speak of as heaven.

The first 20 chapters of Revelation have told quite a story. Through the use of dramatic apocalyptic symbols taken directly from the Old Testament and then set against the backdrop of the first century Roman empire, John has “revealed” the story behind the story, taking us from the demonically-empowered Roman empire waging war upon the church of Jesus Christ, to the final chapters of redemptive history which describe the coming destruction of the Babylon the Great, the fate of the beast and the false prophet, the defeat of Satan, and the final judgment.

Recall that in the previous section of Revelation (chapter 20, verses 11-15), John describes the final judgment and that terrible day when the books are opened and all of the dead are judged according to what they have done. Having established a covenant of works with Adam in the Garden of Eden at the very beginning of the redemptive drama, at the end of time God will judge all men and women according to their deeds, whether good or evil. For those who know not Christ, this will be a day of absolute terror, when all of their public and private sins are revealed, and when they hear the final and irreversible verdict of eternal punishment in the lake of fire, along with the Devil and all those who have served him.

But for the Christian believer, on the other hand, judgment day is not future, it is past. Indeed, when Jesus Christ died on the cross that first Good Friday, he was punished for all of our sins and for all of our transgressions—sins past, sins present, sins future. Because Jesus Christ bore the judgment of God we will not face God’s wrath on the final day. Therefore, when we appear before God’s throne on the day of judgment, we will not hear words of condemnation. Rather, because of Christ’s saving work on our behalf, we will hear words of blessing—“well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into that kingdom which has been prepared for you from before the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:21). And now in Revelation 21-22, John describes the glorious inheritance which awaits all of the people of God.

As we turn to our text in Revelation 21, John will contrast the city of man and the city of God, contrasting the beauty of bride of Christ and the glories of the inheritance she will receive, with that which awaits the inhabitants of Babylon the Great, the bride of the dragon.

In Revelation 20:11, John has just told us that at the time of the final judgment, “*earth and sky fled from [God’s] presence, and there was no place for them.*” Therefore, even as the final judgment follows immediately upon the destruction of the cosmos, so too, the new creation follows immediately upon the heels of the final judgment when the new creation replaces the present heaven and earth.¹ In fact, it is the destruction of the present heaven and earth which prepares the way for a new heaven and earth as

¹ Beale, Revelation, 1039.

described by John in verse 1: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”*

John is making a distinction between two radically different orders of things, what we have spoken of elsewhere in terms of two redemptive ages, “this age” and “the age to come.” The current heaven and earth belong to this present evil age, which, John says, is even now passing away in anticipation of the glorious new creation depicted here. However, when John speaks of a “new earth,” the English-speaking ear hears a “second” earth, created subsequently to the first one. But in Greek, a new earth (*kainos gae*) is primarily of a different kind than the present heavens and earth. This simply means that the present heaven and earth is temporary and is destined to perish. But the new heaven and earth, on the other hand, belong to the age to come, and are therefore, eternal. They will never perish.

Perhaps it is useful to think of the contrast between the present heaven and earth and the new heaven and earth just as we think of the resurrection of our bodies. Like the present heaven and earth, our bodies are also destined to perish. Because of Christ’s bodily resurrection—the first fruits—one day we too will be raised imperishable. And just as our bodies will be raised without loss of our personal identities, so too, the new heaven and earth will be completely re-created while at the same time maintaining some continuity to the present heaven and earth.² In other words, although they will be completely recreated with every trace of human sin purged from them, the new heavens and earth will be recognizable in the same way our resurrection bodies will be.

Therefore, we should not think of heaven as eternal existence as disembodied spirits. Rather we will spend eternity in resurrected and glorified bodies, dwelling in the new heaven and earth in the presence of God, fulfilling the end for which we have been created.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:19-23: *“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”* Paul very clearly describes the new creation being liberated from decay being directly connected to the resurrection of our bodies. All things will be made new, when the curse is removed. This liberation from decay is what John is describing here in Revelation 21-22.

It is also very important to notice that John connects the cosmic renewal directly to the dawn of the age to come and that this follows the final judgment. This means that the language throughout the Bible of a redeemed heaven and earth is not in any way related to this present age. This contradicts the contention of a number of postmillennial writers, who argue that passages such as Isaiah 65:17-25 (our Old Testament lesson), are fulfilled, in part, during this present evil age, in an earthly millennium yet to dawn.³ Rather, Isaiah is referring to the same event as is John, only doing so in pre-messianic terms. In Isaiah’s prophecy, YHWH declares, *“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”*

² Beale, *Revelation*, 1040.

³ Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 203-04.

Isaiah uses language of earthly renewal to point to that which John now explains with much great clarity after the coming of Jesus Christ. Says Isaiah, “*but be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. `Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,’ says the LORD.*” Although Isaiah speaks of the new heavens and earth in exaggerated earthly terms, Isaiah is depicting the new heaven and earth as an age in which there is no longer any curse. This is clearly a reference to the age to come and not to an earthly millennium which dawns before Christ returns, as postmillennarians believe.

But there is a major point of difference between this present earth and the renewed earth yet to come. This is because in the new creation, “*there was no longer any sea.*” Throughout the Book of Revelation, the sea has been described as the abode of the Dragon (Satan), the abode of the dead, the center of commerce which is transversed by the unbelieving nations and dominated by Babylon the Great who sits on many waters. The sea is the place of storm and tempest, cold, dark and frightening to all of John’s first century readers. But in the new heaven and earth there is no longer any sea. This is not because God hates the ocean and the creatures who live in it! Rather in the new heavens and earth there will be no place for the dragon to hide, no abode for dead, no unbelieving nations engaging in commerce. No longer will storms sweep the earth. Therefore, in the New Jerusalem there will be no more sea.

In verse 2, John “*saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*” The new creation which replaces the old is now called the New Jerusalem, also drawing upon a theme in Isaiah (this time taken from Isaiah 52:1), which speaks of a glorious time of Israel’s restoration at the end of the messianic age. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets have repeatedly spoken of the redeemed Israel as the bride of YHWH. But here in Revelation, John speaks of the church as both the heavenly Zion and the bride of the Lamb. Now he depicts the church in terms of a New Jerusalem, which even now is coming down out of heaven. This reinforces the point made throughout the New Testament that the kingdom of God has already come and is even now forcefully advancing before the day of final judgment, when Christ’s kingdom comes in all its fullness and when all of God’s enemies are destroyed, having received their final sentence.

John refers to this New Jerusalem as the bride of the Lamb, a point which further serves to highlight the huge contrast between the city of man in all its manifestations and the city of God. From Babel to Nineveh, to ancient Babylon, to the city of Rome of John’s day, to the Babylon the Great of John’s vision, the allure of the city of man is like that of a harlot, based upon temporary gratification and a beauty which is merely a Satanic deception. Indeed, as we will soon see, the beauty of the New Jerusalem, now radiantly adorned by her bridegroom, completely and totally transcends anything the city of man can offer. Once having glimpsed this scene as Jesus had, we now see why Jesus was not interested in receiving all of the kingdoms of this world when they were offered to him by Satan during his time of temptation during the 40 days in the wilderness. Jesus sees the city of man for what it is. This should serve to remind us that despite the attraction of the city of man, its glory is an illusion, its

beauty can never compare to that which God is preparing for his people.

John now reports those words for which those of us living in this fallen and sinful world, full of sickness, suffering and human cruelty, so desperately long to hear. In verse 3 we read, *“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”* The great covenant promise God made first to Abraham and then to all of his people throughout redemptive history is now a glorious reality. Promise has become fulfillment. Type and shadow have become reality. God dwells with his people, who are fully redeemed and glorified, forever safe from peril and danger. God’s people have at long last entered the promised land and begin their Sabbath rest. With God’s people dwelling in his presence, all effects of human sin the curse are now gone. God himself *“will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* And with the old order of things done away with, we read in verse 5, *“He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”* The new creation has come, the former things are no more. There is no more death. There is no more suffering. There are no more tears. Everything is made new.

Then the voice said, *“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”* The creator-redeemer God only speaks the truth when he affirms that his great covenant promise as now a present reality for the people of God. But this is not all he has to say. In verse 6 we read that the one seated on the throne, said to John: *“It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”* God has spoken of a new creation and it is so. He also identifies himself as that one is before all things and after all things. In other words, he alone is the sovereign one who rules over everything from the beginning of history until its end. This means that all of human history is under God’s sovereign control and he has finally brought all things to the end for which they have been created. God works all things according to the counsel of his will.

This is only the second time in the Book of Revelation where God is explicitly quoted and this is one of the great proof-texts in Scripture for the deity of Christ.⁴ Here, God declares himself to be the Alpha and the Omega, while in Revelation 1:17-18, Jesus affirms of himself that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. The conclusion is obvious—Jesus is God. And he who is the living water, will now give that living water to his people without cost or without limit. One day we will drink of this water and we will never thirst again.

We know from our study of earlier chapters that those who overcome, are those who remain faithful to the end, despite the persecution of the beast. They not only inherit the glories of the New Jerusalem, but God’s covenant promise is reaffirmed through means of a sovereign oath. *“I will be his God and he will be my son.”* But to those who have stood before God in the judgment and sought entrance into the heavenly city based upon their own good works, or through the means of their own righteousness, they will not be granted entrance into the New Jerusalem. There are covenant blessings secured by Christ for those who overcome, and there are covenant curses which fall upon all those who reject the savior. Thus in verse 8 we hear the frightening declaration: *“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 of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”*

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 1055.

With the covenant curses pronounced, once again, John witnesses the glories of the heavenly city. *“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”* This stands in sharp contrast to the earlier vision in Revelation 17-18 of Babylon the Great, whose beauty was utterly superficial. Babylon was a whore and an idolater. But the New Jerusalem is radiant and pure, possessing a true and eternal beauty which human eyes have not yet seen. Says John of the heavenly city: *“It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.”* The high wall is symbolic of the safety enjoyed by all those dwelling within. The reference to twelve gates, guarded by twelve angels with the name of the twelve tribes of Israel, recalls Ezekiel’s vision of the heavenly city in Ezekiel 48:31-34, and points to the fact that the heavenly city is the true Israel, her splendor far exceeding that which the prophets had seen.

The true Israel is also the church. This explains why in verse 13, John sees the following: *“There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”* The fact that there are gates at each of the four points of the compass reminds us of the universal nature of the kingdom of God. The New Jerusalem includes people from every race and tribe and tongue under heaven. There are so many saints that they cannot be counted. In addition to twelve gates (probably representing the Old Testament people of God), the heavenly city has twelve foundations, symbolic of the apostles who bore witness to the saving work of Jesus Christ, who is the chief cornerstone in the temple of God, where all of God’s people now dwell in perfect peace and safety.

The focus of John’s vision now turns to the measurements of the city, and to the fact that God is forever present with his people. Thus we read in verse 15, *“the angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia [1500 miles] in length, and as wide and high as it is long.”* The language John uses is not to be taken literally, but is symbolic of perfection. The city is 1500 miles high, long and wide. John has just described a giant cube, making a literal interpretation a bit problematic! But the angel is not finished. *“He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using.”* The walls of the earthly Jerusalem were repeatedly breached by her enemies. But the heavenly city is protected by walls which are impossible to breach. John’s point is that once we are within her walls, we are forever safe from our two great enemies, sin and Satan. Once inside nothing can harm us because we now dwell in God’s presence.

Indeed, the beauty of the bride of the Lamb transcends human imagination. *“The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.”* The city is not only beautiful beyond description, but the full range of precious gems tell us that it is perfect, not because of the great worth of the gold and the gemstones—glorious as they are—but because God dwells here with his people. It is God’s presence which gives the city its splendor, not the gems embedded in its walls, nor the gold which makes up its streets.

But the full measure of God’s covenant blessings can now be seen in verses 22-26. *“I did not see a*

temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” That to which the earthly temple (the building and its priests and altar) had pointed has now become a reality. The Lord Almighty and the Lamb now dwell together with the people of God. No longer is there need of a building which foreshadows the reality depicted here. That to which the temple had pointed has now come! Furthermore, we read in verse 23, that *“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.”*

Indeed, the city radiates because of God’s glory, not because light of sun, moon, or stars, reflects from the precious gems. There will be no more night and its gates will always be open. This is an echo from Isaiah 60, which speaks of the nations of the earth coming to Jerusalem to pay homage to Israel’s God. As explained by John in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, the imagery here is not that of material wealth, but of God’s people, who come from every nation so as to worship him upon his throne. So safe and secure is the heavenly city that *“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.”* The heavenly city is the eternal home of God’s elect. And this is what should think of when we speak of heaven.

Before we conclude, however, notice that in chapter 22:1-5, the scene described by John calls to mind to essential features of the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Life (the sacrament of the covenant of works) and the River of Life, which, according to Genesis 2:10, flowed out of Eden. Says John in Revelation 22:1, *“then an angel showed me the river of the water of life, as 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. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. 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. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”*

That which we lost in Eden is regained in the heavenly city because of the saving work of the Lamb, who has triumphed over all of his enemies. And this is where the story of redemption inevitably leads, to a New Eden, an Eden which far surpasses the glories of the garden of Genesis 2-3. In the New Eden, we will not only drink freely from the River of Life, but we will eat from the same Tree of Life, the sacrament of the covenant of works, from which Adam was barred after the Fall. We read that its leaves are for the healing of the nations, which simply reminds us that all the nations have been healed once the curse has been removed. In the New Eden, all the nations are now joined together as one people in the heavenly city. We will no longer be divided by race, language, culture or social status. We will all be one, dwelling together in the presence of God.

Beloved, the glorious scene described here will one day become a reality for all of the people of God. We will be raised from the dead in imperishable bodies. There will be no more pain, no more tears, no more death, no more sadness. The curse will be gone and we will fulfill that end for which we have been created. In the New Jerusalem, we will see God in our flesh (as Job once prophesied and which John now confirms). We will drink freely from the River of Life. We will eat our fill from the Tree of Life. We will behold the glories of God described here, completely safe and in perfect peace.

Therefore, as we sweat and suffer, struggle and grieve in this life, let us never lose sight of what awaits us in the next. Through the testimony of John, we too have seen the new heaven and earth. Its glories

are beyond description. It is that place where God Almighty and the Lamb dwell. It will be our eternal home. For the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are our God and we are his people. And this is our glorious inheritance which God has promised to all those in Jesus Christ. With this scene before our eyes, let us not become weary of believing what is true, and doing what is right. For a new heaven and a new earth await us where we will dwell in blessed peace and safety in the presence of God, forever, and ever and ever and ever . . . Amen!