

The New Heaven and New Earth Revelation 21:1-8

Not everyone thinks it helpful to focus on the future. They've bought into the old saying that people who do are *"so heavenly minded they're of no earthly good."* On the contrary, I'm persuaded that we will never be of much use in this life until we've developed a healthy obsession with the next. Therefore, we must take steps to cultivate and intensify in our souls an ache for the beauty of the age to come. And that is precisely my aim as we turn our attention to Revelation 21-22.

Why Think About Heaven?

(1) A contemplative focus on the beauty of heaven frees us from excessive dependence upon earthly wealth and comfort. If there awaits us an eternal inheritance of immeasurable glory, it is senseless to expend effort and energy here, sacrificing so much time and money, to obtain for so brief a time in corruptible form what we will enjoy forever in consummate perfection.

Listen to Paul's words in Philippians 3:20-21. "Our citizenship," says Paul, "is in heaven" (3:20a). Knowing this enables the soul to escape the grip of "earthly things" (Phil. 3:19) and to "stand firm" (Phil. 4:1). Paul in no way denies or minimizes the reality of our earthly obligations. He reminds the Philippians that their bodies were in Philippi. Their names were enrolled as Roman citizens. They had voting rights. They owed their taxes to an earthly king. They were protected by the laws of a this-worldly state. The same goes for those of us who live in Oklahoma City, OK. We cannot ignore the obligations that fall upon us as citizens of this state and country.

But our fundamental identity, and thus the affection of our hearts and the focus of our minds must be *in heaven*! Paul appeals to our patriotic pride, not in Philippi in the first century or in Oklahoma City in the 21st, but in the New Jerusalem, our real residence! Therefore, be governed by *its* rules, *its* principles, *its* values. Paul is careful to insist that our citizenship "is" (present tense) in heaven, not "will be". We are *already* citizens of a new state. We are resident aliens here on earth.

Peter contends that the ultimate purpose of the new birth (1 Peter 1:3-4) is our experience of a *heavenly* hope, an inheritance that is "imperishable," by which he means incorruptible, not subject to decay or rust or mold or dissolution or disintegration. It is "reserved in heaven" for us, kept safe, under guard, protected and insulated against all intrusion or violation. This hope is the grounds for our joy (v. 6) that sustains us in trial and suffering.

A few verses later he exhorts his readers to “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). This is a commanded obsession. Fixate fully! Rivet your soul on the grace that you will receive when Christ returns. Tolerate no distractions. Entertain no diversions. Don’t let your mind be swayed. Devote every ounce of mental and spiritual and emotional energy to concentrating and contemplating on the grace that is to come. What grace is that? It is the grace of the heavenly inheritance described in 1 Peter 1:3-6!

The expectation of a “city that has foundations” energized Abraham’s heart to persevere in a foreign land. All the patriarchs are described as “seeking a [heavenly] homeland” (Hebrews 11:14). Their determination in the face of trial was fueled by their desire for a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16). As pleasant as it may be now, what we see and sense and savor in this life is an ephemeral shadow compared with the substance of God himself. Earthly joys are fragmented beams, but God is the sun. Earthly refreshment is at best a sipping from intermittent springs, but God is the ocean!

(2) A concentrated focus on heaven and the age to come enables us to respond appropriately to the injustices of this life. Essential to heavenly joy is witnessing the vindication of righteousness and the judgment of evil. Only from our anticipation of the new perspective of heaven, from which we, one day, will look back and evaluate what now seems senseless, can we be empowered to endure this world in all its ugliness, injustice, and moral deformity.

(3) Setting our hearts and minds on heaven produces the fruit of endurance and perseverance now. ***The strength to endure present suffering is the fruit of meditating on future satisfaction!*** This is the clear message of several texts such as Matthew 5:11-12; Romans 8:17-18,23,25b; Hebrews 13:13-14; and 1 Peter 1:3-8. But let’s consider just one of these many passages.

Romans 8:18 is Paul’s declaration that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” We do not lose heart because we contemplate the unseen things of the future and nourish our souls with the truth that whatever we endure on this earth is producing a glory far beyond all comparison! Christians are not asked to treat pain as though it were pleasure, or grief as though it were joy, but to bring all earthly adversity into comparison with heavenly glory and thereby be strengthened to endure. The exhortation in Hebrews 13:13-14 to willingly bear the reproach of Christ is grounded in the expectation of a “city which is to come,” namely, the heavenly New Jerusalem.

Nowhere is this principle better seen than in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Gazing at the grandeur of heavenly glory transforms our value system. In the light of what is “eternal”, what we face now is only “momentary”. Suffering appears “prolonged” only in the absence of an eternal perspective. The “affliction” of this life is regarded as “light” when compared with the “weight” of that “glory” yet to come. It is “burdensome” only when we lose sight of our heavenly future. The key to success in suffering, as odd as that sounds, is in taking the long view. Only when juxtaposed with the endless ages of eternal bliss does suffering in this life become tolerable.

There is yet another contrast to be noted. In v. 18 Paul juxtaposes “transient” things “that are seen” with “eternal” things “that are unseen.” Note especially the connection between v. 18 and v. 16. Our “inner nature” is being renewed *as we look* or *while we look* at the unseen, eternal things of the age to come. If you don’t “look” you won’t change! The process of renewal only occurs *as the believer looks to things as yet unseen*. As we fix the gaze of our hearts on the glorious hope of the age to come, God progressively renews our inner being, notwithstanding the simultaneous decay of our outer frame! Inner renewal does not happen automatically or mechanically. Transformation happens only *as* or *provided that* we “look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen” (v. 18).

(4) Nothing exerts such purifying power on the heart as does a contemplative focus on heaven. Meditation on the unseen glories of heaven energizes the heart to say no to fleshly desires. This is the clear witness of Colossians 3:1-4; 1 John 3:2-3; and 2 Peter 3:11-13.

Unpacking the Glory of Eternal Life in the New Heaven and New Earth

Here’s how I propose to work our way through this remarkable portrayal of the age to come. We’ll look at it in terms of what is present and what is absent, or again, what we will see and feel and experience and what we won’t.

But first we need to look at v. 1. This present earth and the heavens above will “pass away” when Jesus Christ returns to destroy his enemies and consummate his kingdom. But observe closely that this present earth does not give way to a purely spiritual existence somewhere in the clouds above. The “first heaven and the first earth” give way to a new heaven and a new earth. The relationship between the former and the latter is ambiguous. Will the new heaven and earth *replace* the old or simply be a *renewal* of what we now experience? Certainly there are elements of *continuity*, even as there are between our present, corruptible bodies and our future, incorruptible and glorified bodies. We will be in heaven the *same*, though transformed, people that we are now. Yet, the heaven and earth to come are also said to be “new” or *kainos*, a word which typically indicates newness of quality, not time.

One element of discontinuity is ***the absence of the “sea” in the new creation***. Those of you who love to fish and sail and water ski and ponder the expanse and beauty of the ocean need not worry. John does not mean that there won’t be bodies of water in the new earth for us to enjoy. Let me explain what he does mean.

The “sea” was typically regarded as ***symbolic of evil, chaos, and anti-kingdom powers*** with whom Yahweh must contend. See especially Isaiah 17:12-13; 27:1; 51:9-10; 57:20; Jer. 46:7-8; Job 26:7-13. And we must not forget that in Revelation 13:1 (see also 17:2, 15) the “sea” is the origin of the Beast as well as the pagan and rebellious nations that oppose the kingdom of God. It is also the place of the dead (Rev. 20:13) and the location of the world’s idolatrous trade activity (18:10-19). As Ladd has noted, in ancient times the sea “represented the realm of the dark, the

mysterious, and the treacherous” (276; cf. Ps. 107:25-28; Ezek. 28:8; Dan. 7:3ff). Thus, this is John’s way of saying that in the new creation all such evil and corruption and unbelief and darkness will be banished.

When Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee he was giving us a foretaste of heaven. It was his way of saying that one day he will rid the heavens and the earth of all opposition and rebellion and disturbances.

What we will See, Sense, and Enjoy in the New Heaven and New Earth

There are several things that call for our close attention.

(1) The New Jerusalem (v. 2).

I’ve lived in nine cities in my life, some small and some exceedingly large. They all had their strengths and weaknesses. But none could ever be compared to the New Jerusalem. We’ll look more closely at the New Jerusalem next week. But rest assured today that in the New Jerusalem there will be no pollution or traffic jams or property taxes or crime or ghettos or smog or overcrowded streets.

But the New Jerusalem is more than a place. ***The New Jerusalem is also a people: you and me!*** Here we see that the descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven to earth is compared to a bride coming to her husband. It would appear that John is equating the new Jerusalem with the bride of Christ, hence ***the Church = the New Jerusalem*** (see Rev. 3:12; 19:7-8). This identification is explicitly reinforced by Revelation 21:9-10 where John is told, “‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” In other words, whereas in one sense the people of God shall dwell in the New Jerusalem, in another sense the people of God ***are*** the New Jerusalem (see also Heb. 11:8-10,13-16).

(2) Intimate Fellowship with God (v. 3).

The point of v. 3 is to interpret the significance of both the city and the marriage metaphor in v. 2. In other words, the imagery of v. 2 is designed to portray intimacy and spiritual communion between God and his people (in fulfillment of such OT texts as Lev. 26:11-12 and Ezek. 37:27; cf. 2 Cor. 6:16).

This is what makes heaven so heavenly! What makes heaven heavenly isn’t the absence of the things that we dislike now on earth. ***What makes heaven heavenly is the presence of God!*** Heaven will be glorious not primarily because there will be no sin or death or pain or tears but because of the presence of God.

No longer will there be any sense of distance between us and God. Never again will you feel that God is absent or remote. Loneliness is banished from the new heaven and new earth. Our constant companion, our closest and most intimate friend will be God himself! Yes, God is omnipresent. He fills the galaxies with his glory. But his primary place of residence is with you and me! If today you don't sense God's nearness, comfort and reassure yourself with the promise that in eternity future you will always and forever be with God and God will always and forever be with you.

This isn't to suggest that we must live now bereft of a sense of God's presence. The Holy Spirit lives in each and every one of God's children. Jesus promised us in the Great Commission that he would be with us even unto the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). But Paul also said that "while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6). But when the new heaven and new earth arrive we will be "with the Lord" in every conceivable sense: spiritually and physically.

(3) Tears of sorrow and pain will be banished from the new heaven and new earth (v. 4).

How could we possibly weep in sorrow and sadness and anguish if we are with God and God is with us? There are, of course, multiple reasons why we cry. Tears of joy and gratitude and amazement will certainly be present in the new earth. But gone forever are the tears caused by grief and pain and sin. The tears that we shed now because of persecution and slander will nowhere be found in the age to come.

But look closely at what is said in v. 4. It isn't the case that you and I will wipe away our own tears. God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Many of you are weeping today. Some of you hold back tears of sorrow and suffering for fear that if you ever yielded to the tendency to weep you wouldn't be able to stop the flow. But in the new earth God will personally wipe away every tear! He will personally banish from your thoughts and your experience everything and anything that in this life led you to cry.

I'm a hopeless romantic and I love movies that portray it well. There's a particular scene in the film "You've Got Mail" that illustrates what we read here in v. 4. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan have been corresponding anonymously by email. Hanks knows who she is but she has no idea that he is the man behind the flow of correspondence. In the film's final scene, she discovers that it was Hanks all along. She begins to weep. Tom Hanks pulls out a handkerchief and begins gently and lovingly to wipe away her tears. "Don't cry, Shop Girl," he says. "Don't cry." Of course, I cry every time I watch that scene. One day God will pull out a handkerchief and wipe every tear from your eyes. "Don't cry, Susan. Don't cry, Max. Don't cry, Sam." Your sorrow today may feel overwhelming and endless, but it isn't. God will make certain of that when he wipes away every tear from your eyes. And he will do it because he will have banished from your experience every cause of pain and sorrow.

Here we find the fulfillment of what is prophesied by Isaiah (35:10):

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; and they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

(4) Death shall be no more! (v. 4).

No more death. Not of husbands, wives, aunts, uncles, children, brothers, sisters, grandfathers, grandmothers, cousins, friends, neighbors. Funeral homes will be put out of business. Cemeteries will be empty, for all will have been raised in glorified bodies that are no longer susceptible to disease and decay. Never again the long meetings at the funeral home deciding on caskets and vaults and limo's and flowers. No graveside services. No obituaries to be read, no video tributes of a person's life. No eulogies. No flowers to be sent or cards of condolence to be written. Never again a long caravan of cars with their headlights on. No police escorts to the cemetery. No headstones or awkward moments when you don't know what to say.

(5) Neither shall there be any more pain (v. 4).

There will be no physical pain because our bodies will have been glorified and made like unto the body of Jesus. Paul spoke of this in Romans 8 and called it “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). Earlier in Romans 8 he made this remarkable promise: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11).

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul again declares that “this perishable body,” that is to say, this body that is subject to germs and bacteria and cancer and old age and decay, “this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality, . . . [and] then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:53-56).

This is again what Paul had in mind when he assured us in Philippians 3 that Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:21). That is why there will no longer be kidney failure or heart disease or diabetes or cancer. No more asking why me or how long? No decay or dissolution.

Those of you who live with constant, chronic pain and disability should be especially encouraged and empowered to persevere. The day is coming, and when it comes it comes forever, never to be reversed, when all pain will be gone! And not just physical pain, but emotional pain, marital pain, relational pain, the pain of a wayward child or an unfaithful spouse, the pain of disappointment and loss, indeed, the pain of every sort and from every cause, all will be gone!

You who suffer from depression or anxiety or relentless fear will forever and finally be set free! The joy and happiness and elation that will be yours will immeasurably, indeed infinitely exceed anything you have ever experienced in this life or hope to have experienced.

This is because “the former things have passed away” (v. 4). The “former things” refers to whatever may have been the cause of your pain. It will have disappeared, never to re-emerge. Indeed, as God himself declares in v. 5, **he is “making all things new.”**

What will God Make New?

Does “all things” really mean everything? Yes!

We will be made spiritually and morally new in the sense that our battle with sin and temptation and lust and greed and envy will be forever over. Your frustration with not being able to do what you know is right and your guilt for having failed will be gone. The struggle to resist wicked and perverse thoughts will give way to constant victory.

As I have already stated, we will be made physically and bodily new. There will be enough continuity between what we look like now and what we’ll look like then that we will undoubtedly recognize one another. But gone will be all defects and disabilities. You who are frustrated with your bodies now and live in constant envy of those you regard as more attractive or more athletic than you will never experience that in the new earth. If you hate your body now, you will love it then. Paralysis will be gone. Blemishes will be eliminated. Deafness and blindness and every deformity will be banished.

Let’s be clear about this once again. You will not spend eternity as a disembodied soul or spirit. You will live forever in a new, transformed, glorified physical body that is perfectly suited and adaptable to life in the new heaven and new earth.

Reassurance from Him who Cannot Lie

“Sam, you say all this with such energy and confidence. How can you be so certain? How do you know it isn’t all a pipe dream? How can I be sure that if I put my hope in this promise it won’t come crashing down on me and leave me disappointed as has happened in so many other instances?” Good question. The answer is given in v. 5 – **“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”**

How do we know they are trustworthy and true? We know because they are the words of him who is “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (v. 6). God has staked his reputation on it. His honor and fidelity hang in the balance. He said it, therefore it will come to pass. In fact, God speaks as if it has already come to pass. “It is done” (v. 6) is literally, “it has happened” (perfect tense). But even more to the point, the verb is plural, hence: “everything has

happened"! In speaking this way God assures us as only he can that everything he promised will most assuredly come to pass.

What does it mean when God declares that he is "the Alpha and the Omega"?

As you probably know, "Alpha" is the first letter in the Greek alphabet and "Omega" is the last letter. But God doesn't intend for you to think about letters but about ultimate reality. He wants you to think about him!

God is the first and only source and cause of all things and he is the final and only goal and end of all things. Everything originates from him and everything finds its meaning and value in relation to how it glorifies and honors him.

This means that there was nothing before him. Nothing explains him. Nothing has caused him. He simply and eternally IS! There never was a time when God was not. There never was a time when he began to be. And there will never a time when he isn't. He never at any time chose to be what he is. He has always been what he always is and always will be. God did not emerge out of a variety of possibilities. Rather, everything emerged out of him when he called the universe into existence. He is the Alpha!

But he is also the Omega. The goal of all things is the glory of God. The aim of all things is the praise and honor of God. Nothing has any intrinsic value aside from its capacity to enjoy God and to make him known. If history appears aimless to you, I assure you that it is not. Even the most random and seemingly senseless events in some mysterious way are serving to point to God and to shine a light on his wisdom and justice and power and love and holiness.

Two Blessings that God Supplies to those who Thirst and Conquer

In vv. 6b-7 John describes both the blessings that God provides in the new heaven and new earth and the conditions that must be met to receive them.

(1) To those who "thirst" God gives freely from the spring of the water of life (v. 6b).

Why doesn't he simply say, "to the one who *believes*"? Why "thirst"? In fact, this isn't the only time this imagery is used. In Revelation 22:17 we read this: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who desires take the water of life without price."

So here we have two words used: "**thirsts**" and "**desires**." His point is that saving faith or belief is more than a merely intellectual agreement with the truth of the gospel. Saving faith, the belief that leads to eternal life, is the thirsting of the soul and the desiring of the soul for the satisfaction that only Christ can bring. If you prefer the "beverages" of the world to the life-giving water of God himself, you will never know eternal life.

No one in their right mind prefers hell to heaven. But many prefer anything to God. Everyone is thirsty in the sense that all people long for and desire for their souls the deepest satisfaction possible. But unbelief is the preference of the soul for worldly pleasures and carnal joys in the place of God himself. God gives eternal life and soul-satisfying joy to those who long for and yearn for and deeply desire him above all else. When we read that God will give to the thirsty soul the water of life he means far more than simply prolonged existence. It isn't so much the length of life but the quality of life that is in view. It is life characterized by joy and delight and satisfaction and fascination and exultation in the beauty of God and all he is for us in Jesus.

But tragically the darkened mind of the unbeliever is at enmity with God. The unregenerate heart desires replacements for God rather than the refreshment that God himself provides. To the unregenerate, God doesn't taste good. He is at best bland, and at worst bitter. They see him as a threat to their joy rather than as its fulfillment. And so they eat and drink from everything the world has to offer, insanely thinking that it will bring them the happiness their hearts desire.

And would you notice how much it costs: it is ***“without payment”***! You can't pay God for the water of life. You only have to thirst for it. You can't bargain with God. You can't trade for this water. It isn't up for sale or auction. It's a gift to those who thirst for it.

Your thirst doesn't purchase the water. Your thirst doesn't merit the water. Thirst is not a work but simply another way of referring to faith. To be thirsty in the sense meant here is to be desperate and empty and persuaded that no one can satisfy except God alone. The water of life is free to those who thirst for it, for those who come empty handed and say, “God, fill me with yourself. Satisfy me with your beauty. Enthrall me with your glory. In your presence is the fullness of joy and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).”

But wait a minute! If we have to fulfill a condition before we can drink of this water, that is to say, if we must thirst in order to drink, how can it be said that it is given to us “without payment”? In other words, how does one fulfill a condition for receiving grace without earning grace? Part of the answer is that “when God's grace is promised based on a condition, that condition is also a work of God's grace” (Piper, *Future Grace*, 79). Or again, “God graciously enables the conditions that he requires” (235). The water of life is given “without cost” because it is God himself who graciously provokes and elicits the “thirst” as the condition on which the water is bestowed.

(2) To those who conquer God grants the heritage of being God's son or daughter (v. 7).

The one who “conquers” or “overcomes” is the one whose life is characterized by persevering faith in spite of persecution. For example, in Revelation 2:10–11, Jesus says to the church at Smyrna, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life . . . The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2:10-11). Conquering means experiencing victory over the forces of Satan and the world that tempt us to abandon faith in Christ (see Rev. 2:26; 12:11).

Look more closely at v. 7. Precisely what is the “heritage” or inheritance of those who conquer? It is the incomparable joy of being a son or daughter of the Most High God. There is no blessing greater than this: to be a child of God! That means you get God and all that God has. It means that just like the father of the prodigal son who cast aside all thoughts of personal dignity and ran down that road to embrace his repentant child, God comes to you with a ring and a robe and a never-ending feast of every spiritual blessing.

The Tragic End for those who Slake their Thirst Elsewhere

Those whose thirst for the things of this world was stronger than any thirst they might have for God will find their end in the lake of fire, which is the second death (v. 8). They were “cowardly” in the sense that they preferred the safety of blending in with the ways of the world instead of standing out by faith in Christ and happily embracing the persecution it would bring. They were “faithless” insofar as they put their trust, not in God, not in the beauty and joy of Christ, but in the satisfaction that comes with vengeance and sexual immorality and all manner of detestable things and idolatry.

This catalog of sins concludes with “all liars” (see also the list in 22:15). In Revelation 2:2 this word was used of those who “called themselves apostles” when in fact they were not. The related verb form was used in Revelation 3:9 of ethnic Jews who “lie” by claiming be God’s people even though they reject Jesus. The word is also used in 1 John 2:4,22; 4:20; and 5:10 of those professing church members whose doctrine and behavior reveals that they are in fact unregenerate. Thus, the emphasis isn’t so much on telling lies in general as it is on professing to be a Christian when in fact one is not.

The End

All people, of every age, gender, and ethnicity will face God in the end. He is, after all, not only the Alpha but the Omega. But all will not find in him the same thing. Those who preferred the passing pleasures of sin offered by the world will meet God as the one who punishes in the lake of fire, while those whose thirst was for God and the blessings of forgiveness and fellowship that only he can provide will meet him as their Father, as the one who freely gives the water of eternal life and joy.