

## Finally Home: What Heaven Means for Earth

### New Heaven and New Earth

Revelation 21:1-14

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<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." <sup>5</sup> And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. <sup>7</sup> The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. <sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." <sup>9</sup> Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup> It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— <sup>13</sup> on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup> And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:1-14)

Sometimes books and stories written for children become very helpful for adults. I mentioned a few weeks ago that adults in my former church appreciated when I would give children the "big idea" of the sermon very clearly because it actually helped them as well.

Many of you have probably benefited greatly from C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* not only because they are really good stories, but also because they are written at a level that is simple and easy to digest. Good resources for children can be very helpful for adults.

A few years ago, I purchased the Big Picture Story Bible by David Helm for Savannah. This children's book came up with my preaching application team as we studied Revelation 21-22 because Helm does a great job synthesizing big biblical issues in a way that is really helpful. In

fact, I love the tag-line of the book: The Bible is a big book about a big God who keeps a big promise!

I love how the Big Picture Story Bible ends. After walking the reader through a brief description of the New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem, the last illustration includes these great words:

***“God’s forever people  
will one day  
live in God’s forever place  
under God’s forever rule.”<sup>1</sup>***

The words God’s people, God’s place, and God’s rule are a consistent theme that Helm uses as theological markers or a biblical theology schema throughout his book.<sup>2</sup> I think that the people, place, and rule framework is really helpful.

Just think for instance of a few moments in Biblical history:

- **Garden of Eden:** God dwells with His people in His perfect place with perfect relationships.
- **The Fall:** God’s people are banished from God’s place (Eden) because they violated God’s rule.
- **Israel:** God’s people look for and settle in the promised land while meeting with God in tabernacle or temple living under the Law.
- **Jesus:** God’s son comes to die so that sinful people could become God’s people, be restored back to God’s place, and truly live under God’s rule.

The final moments in Biblical history are reviewed in Revelation 21-22: the New Heaven, New Earth and New Jerusalem. This is the final state and the ultimate conclusion of the God’s redemptive plan. It is heaven on earth. It is God dwelling with his people. It is his people living in their resurrected bodies and in perfect fellowship with one another and their creator (more on this next week).

The New Heaven and the New Earth are where God’s place, God’s people, and God’s rule all combine into one reality and one existence that is perfect, eternal, and glorious. So when we consider what “heaven” will be like, we really need to examine what John saw in Revelation 21-22, because this is where the arc of biblical history leads. This is what the cross was for. The New Heaven and the New Earth are what it means for the followers of Jesus to be finally home.

So, let’s use this paradigm of place, people, and rule to examine the last two chapters of the Bible, see what we can learn about the future home for those who have trusted Jesus, and then let’s determine how this applies to our lives. In other words, what does the future promise of “God’s

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<sup>1</sup> David Helm and Gail Schoonmaker, *The Big Picture Story Bible*, (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2004), 450-451.

<sup>2</sup> In the acknowledgements, Helm expresses gratitude to Graeme Goldsworthy and his works on biblical theology for this framework or outline. For further development of this see Goldsworthy book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching*.

place, people, and rule” have for us now? If the New Heaven and the New Earth are like that, what does it mean now?

## God’s Forever Place

In verses 1-4 we see that the final dwelling place for God’s people is a very special place – something familiar and yet new. This new place is very important because it is, in many respects, the new Eden. The New Heaven and the New Earth are the completion of God’s redemptive plan. The disaster of the Fall (Adam and Eve’s sin) led to the provision of the cross and results in the New Heaven and the Earth. So it is hard to overemphasize the significance of this place in redemptive history.

Verse one begins with the word “then.” What precedes the coming of the New Heaven and the New Earth is important. In chapter 20 there is a 1,000 year reign<sup>3</sup> of Christ on the earth while Satan is temporarily bound (vv 1-6). After Satan is loosed, he is defeated and cast into the Lake of Fire (20:10). What follows is the Great White Throne judgment where the unsaved are raised from dead, judged for their rebellion, and sentenced to the Lake of Fire as well (20:11-15). Prior to any discussion about the New Heaven and the New Earth, there is a final judgment of Satan and all who followed in his treason against God’s rule.

After this decisive and powerful display of divine justice, John sees the New Heaven and the New Earth. Now it is important to note that verse one also says that “*the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*” The old created order was infected by the rebellion and curse of sin, and now this broken realm is purified and renewed. What’s more, the text says that “*the sea was no more.*” It is hard to know if this should be taken literally or entirely figuratively. Regardless, the point is probably related to the fact that the sea was associated with the source of rebellion since the first beast comes out of the sea (Revelation 13). Everything related to the brokenness and rebellion of the world and this place has been ended.

2 Peter 3, a text that we’ll look at more deeply in two weeks, speaks to this cosmic resurrection:

*<sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. <sup>11</sup> Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! <sup>13</sup> But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:10–13 (ESV)*

The “newness” here refers to something that was previously unknown, of a new quality or recently coming into being. In the same way that resurrection of the body is a renewal of the earthly body, so too heaven and earth experience a cosmic renewal. Take note that people are not only renewed; places are renewed as well.

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<sup>3</sup> There are two alternate views on this which have historically been a part of Evangelicalism: 1) Postmillennialism – which takes the thousand year reign as symbolic of a golden age where Christ rules in the hearts of people in a more substantial and increasingly widespread manner, and 2) Amillennialism – which takes the thousand years as a symbolic spiritual fulfillment in the church now or in the future.

The next thing John sees is a beautiful city, called New Jerusalem, descending from heaven to earth. This city is the capital of God's reign, and some believe that this is the place that Jesus referred to in John 14 when he said, "... *in my Father's house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you.*" (John 14:2-3). This city descends out of heaven from God, and it becomes the connection between the New Heaven and the New Earth. It is radiantly beautiful, described as a bride adorned for her husband.

The beautiful city and its descent between earth and heaven is interrupted by a loud voice that emanates from the throne. Remember, it is God who resides on this throne, and this proclamation announces what will be the characteristic reality of God's new place. Notice the emphasis on God and His dwelling:

<sup>3</sup> *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. Revelation 21:3 (ESV)*

God's place is unbelievably wonderful because God and His people have been brought back together! The separation caused because of the entrance of sin into the world and which resulted in an ongoing break in fellowship between Creator and creature has now been reconciled. What's more, we are told what characterizes God's place: no tears, no death, no mourning, no crying, and no pain. The former things have passed away. Don't miss the personal nature of the language in verse 4, "*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes...*"

I am a relentless tear-wiper. When my wife or daughter are crying or when my boys were little and cried, it pained me to watch tears form in their eyes and drip onto their cheeks. Invariably I would wipe the tears away because I hate seeing them sad. And because I'm a bit of a fixer, it just kills me to see them hurt over something when I cannot do anything to change it. At a minimum I can wipe the tears away. The tears, however, are not the problem. They are merely the manifestation of the pain, disappointment, or the brokenness of the created world. Parents are able to help their children deal with the pain, but we are powerless to remove the cause of pain.

But not so with God and His place! According to verse 4, "*the former things have passed away,*" and the result is a restored world which has been cleansed of everything that does not fit with God's heart and His presence. Satan, sin, and death have all been defeated, and God's place is now where righteousness dwells: "*Behold the dwelling place of God is with man.*" (21:3)

I think it is important to realize that God's plan of redemption involves the reclaiming of a place where God dwells with His people. So often we think of Christianity as addressing issues of the heart, and the New Testament rightly focuses attention away from physical structures and locations. Paul tells the church in Corinth that their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20) and that they collectively are the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:16). In other words, the gospel is not limited to a geographic location or a physical building. But there is a day coming that will be as real as this day, where according to Habakkuk 2:14, "*the earth will be filled with knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*" There will be a place – a real, physical place – where believers in Jesus will live in fellowship with one another and with their God.

While the church is more certainly more than a building and a location, I think it is worth mentioning that when God's people gather, it is the closest representation to what the New Heaven and New Earth will be like. Even now as we sing to Lord, as we talk with one another, as we love each other, and as we reflect upon the beauty of our God, we get a small taste of the New Heaven, the New Earth, and New Jerusalem. And as our culture becomes increasingly hostile to Christianity, the weekly gathering of God's people becomes a more poignant sanctuary of grace and future hope. In other words, Sunday should whet our appetites for God's forever place.

## **God's Forever People**

Let's turn next to God's people. We are going to cover this section rather briefly because next Sunday we are going to focus entirely on the perfection of God's people and the doctrine of glorification, especially the implications of verses 5-8.

In Revelation 21 the focus shifts from the dwelling place of God to the people who are in fellowship with Him. In verses 5-9 we see that after another declaration from the throne – "*I am making all things new. . . it is done*" – there are statements oriented toward people:

- "*To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life...*" (v 6)
- "*The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God...*" (v 7)
- "*... the cowardly, faithless, detestable, as for murders, the sexually immoral... their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire...*" (v 8)

As important as God's place is in the redemptive plan of God, it is the people who are objects of both His redemption and His judgment. The cross was necessary in order to spare a rebellious people from their sins as they looked to Christ for atonement and forgiveness. And an essential part of the beauty of the New Heaven and the New Earth is praise emanating from people of every tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9). God's place is for God's people who have been saved through Christ.

In verses 9-21 we are given further detail about New Jerusalem and especially the Bride of the Lamb. The main focus of these verses is the beauty of city because of the glory of its occupants. After introducing New Jerusalem in verses 1-4 as descending down from heaven, now we see a fuller picture of what it means for her to be "*prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*" (21:2).

We see similar language used in verses 9-10, but the order is reversed. In verse two we read about the New Jerusalem described like a bride, and in verses 9-10 John is invited to see the Bride, the wife of the Lamb which then leads Him to observe New Jerusalem. The beauty of the city and the beauty of its occupants are connected in the same way that the corruption and evil of Babylon are connected to the Devil and the Anti-Christ. Babylon is called a harlot (17:1) while New Jerusalem is called the Bride (21:9). These two cities could not be any more different, and they are both characterized by the character of their inhabitants.

Next week we will more fully unpack the glorification of those who belong to the Lamb, but just note verse 11 because it is very important. New Jerusalem is not only described as a bride adorned for her husband (v 2), but now as having "*the glory of God*" (v 11). The city and the people display the glory of the One who redeemed them. Once again a jasper stone is used to

describe the beauty of this city. This same jewel was used in Revelation 4:3 in an attempt to describe the beauty of God on the throne. The beauty of God is seen in this city and its people. To be God's people and to be God's city means that what makes God lovely, attractive, pure, and holy is now seen in His people. To be united in Christ spiritually now means a future union of glory (Rom. 6:5). God's people share in the resurrected glory of Jesus, and New Jerusalem reflects that reality.

Verses 12-21 are loaded with various descriptions of the city. Each aspect is designed to provide further dimension to the nature of the beauty of the city and the people therein. Let's quickly look at the details:

- The city is protected by a great wall with twelve gates, twelve angels and the names of each of the tribes of Israel over them, and underneath the city were twelve foundations with the names of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:12-14). This imagery is designed to communicate that the people of God have an Israel and a church connection (see Eph. 2:20).
- John is instructed to measure the city. New Jerusalem is a perfect cube, its height, length, and width being 12,000 stadia which is 1,380 miles (21:15-17). More important than the actual size is the connection to the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and the temple, which was the place where God dwelt. The Bride now occupies the Holy of Holies. God's people are "in Christ and in God" in the city of New Jerusalem.
- In verses 18-21 there is a further description of the beauty of the city by identifying the precious materials that are part of the construction. The wall is made with jasper, the jewel previously used to describe God's glory and the glory of the city in general. The city itself and its streets are made of pure gold (vv 18, 21). The foundations of the city feature twelve different precious gems, and each of the twelve gates are made of a single pearl. The glory of the city and its people is stunning, reflecting the most precious substances known to mankind.

We have covered a lot of detailed description in reference to New Jerusalem, but let me remind you how this pericope started: "*Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.*" (21:9) John is describing not just the capital city but also the people who live in this beautiful city.

So what will it be like to live in the New Jerusalem and the New Earth as God's people? Randy Alcorn, in his *Heaven*, suggests that this new existence will reflect best of what we enjoy now with people but with a level of holiness, fulfillment, and joy that we have not yet known. Imagine the very best of our relationship with God and with one another being brought together. Imagine lives marked and characterized by unity, love, affirmation, joy, and unending happiness. Think of what it would be like to enjoy a cup of coffee (yes, it must be there!) with Abraham, Noah, Moses, Elijah, and Joshua. What would it be like to sing a Psalm with David, listen to a story from Solomon, pray with James, laugh with Peter, and discuss an aspect of God with the apostle John. Who else would you want to spend time with? Jonathan Edwards, C.S. Lewis, Hudson Taylor, Jim Elliot, Charles Spurgeon, John and Charles Wesley? Imagine playing sports with a handicapped friend, having a conversation with a person who struggled with a brain injury or Alzheimer's. Imagine meeting people who came to Christ through our Christmas Offering or spending time with a family member who died recently or was way too young.

Just imagine a people gathered together whose lives were all remarkably different and yet they all share one common reality: “. . . and then God saved me.” The beauty of the New Earth and New Jerusalem is the glory of God in the people of God.

I really hope that you have a story that sounds like “. . . and then God saved me.” I want that for you because sin is so destructive even now, and I want you to be free of the guilt and condemnation through a relationship with Christ. But I also want you to be in the New Heaven and the New Earth with all those whose stories go “. . . and then God saved me.”

## **God’s Forever Rule**

Remember how we started? We learned the simple truth that ***“God’s forever people will one day live in God’s forever place under God’s forever rule.”*** We now come to the final, beautiful reality of God’s forever rule. Sin was an affront to God’s righteous rule. And God redeemed His people and created a place for them to dwell with Him so that He might rule supreme over all things. So the arc of history is not about humanity or the earth, but it is about God. The Bible is a big book about a big God who keeps a big promise!

In Revelation 21:22-22:5 we see clearly the centrality of God and His rule. He is the center of life in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Look how this appears in the text.

The locational center of life and spirituality was the temple, and verse 22 makes it very clear that the center has radically shifted. What began with the death and resurrection of Christ is now plain and clear: God lives among His people as supreme.

The sun or the moon are no longer needed. Instead the glory of God is the light of this new created world. In verse 23, we see that the sun and moon are no longer needed because the glory of God provides the light that is needed. In other words, there is nothing that exists outside of its connection and dependence upon the glory of God. As central as the sun was for the first earth, so now the glory of God has taken its place of preeminence.

The scope of this authority touches everything. All the nations walk by its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it (v 24, 26). The idea with this statement seems to be that any glory that nations or kings had previously are surrendered or offered to God. In other words, there is no competing glory. God reigns supremely.

And part of the rule of God means that there is no longer any evil or crime. There is no night and there is no need for the gates of the city to be shut. Protection from invaders or those with nefarious intentions is no longer needed. Verse 27 makes this explicitly clear: *“nothing unclean will enter it nor anyone who does what is detestable or false.”* Those people have been dealt with by virtue of God’s judgment, and the only ones on the New Earth and in New Jerusalem are those *“who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”* This book is the record of redemption. Just think of that, those of you who have received Jesus! Your name is recorded in the book of life.

The final scene in Revelation 22:1-5 emphasizes the life-giving qualities of God’s rule, and it harkens back to the Garden of Eden. According to Rev. 22:1, a life-giving river flows from the throne of God, and it runs through the middle of the street of the New Jerusalem.

On either side of the river is the tree of life, which was the tree from which Adam and Eve were banished in Genesis 3:22-24. Now this tree is accessible and bears fruit each month, and its presence indicates peace on earth (22:2). And since all sin and rebellion has been dealt with by God, there will be nothing infected by the presence of sin. The triune God and His people live in perfect fellowship and harmony.

This is what God promised Adam and Eve after they fell. This is why God called Abraham from Ur. This what the Passover Lamb and the Exodus pointed toward. This is what was pictured in the tabernacle and in the temple. This moment is what the prophets longed for. This fellowship is why Jesus came to earth, why He died, and why His resurrection is so important. This is why the church gathers on the first day of the week. This is why we sing, pray, and listen to the Word of God. This is what we long for and what we expectantly wait for.

We long for Revelation 22:4-5.

*<sup>4</sup> They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. Revelation 22:4-5 (ESV)*

What does heaven mean for earth now? It means that if the New Earth is like that, then we ache and pray and patiently wait for the day when **God's forever people will live in God's forever place under God's forever rule.**

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

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