

Death, Immortality, and Heaven: No. 7

Of Abraham it is written, *“For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”* Of the heroes of faith it is further stated, *“These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”* Further, *“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city”* (Heb. 11:8-16).

Sharing that faith, we have been inspired by songs of heaven where the afflictions of earth cannot intrude. With great eloquence, preachers have lifted our focus to a place of indescribable perfection. We try to imagine its nature but are limited to sensory, earthly perceptions. Maybe we learn more of what it is not and less of what it really is.

ISAIAH 65 and HEAVEN

In the eighth century before Christ Isaiah painted a beautiful picture of the new heavens and a new earth and the new Jerusalem:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord” (Isa. 65:17-25).

Isn’t this beautifully poetic? To save space I have copied it as prose, but in your Bible you can better see the numerous Hebrew parallelisms where two lines express the same general thought in different words. So, isn’t this a marvelous poetic glimpse of heaven?

Sorry, folks, but this is not about heaven! Read the passage in its context to see that it is about the restoration of Israel to their land and city from Babylonian captivity.

Restoration to their beloved land would bring much happiness. But there would still be death among them and sinners would be there (v. 20). They would build houses in which to live and eat fruit from the vineyards of their cultivating – the work of their own hands (v. 21-22). They would bear children safely (v. 23). Due to God’s providence, nature would be kind to them so that the destructive animals among them would be no danger to their safety (24-25). This was poetic depiction of the joy of living in their land again with

the favor and constant blessings of God. This was all fulfilled when they were allowed to return and rebuild their city and temple. In Hebrew symbolism it was called a new heaven and a new earth. Compare Ezekiel 11:14-25; 36:16-36.

To attempt to give this a double fulfillment of restoration to their land and of an eternal heaven too requires a vain stretch of the imagination. Will those earthly things that I enumerated above be in heaven? No way! Those things relate to a physical situation instead of a spiritual relationship. We do well to follow truth rather than fanciful flights of the imagination.

We will now look at a parallel passage in the last two chapters of the Bible. Because of the length, only portions will be copied and commented upon here. No effort will be made to explain each symbol; however a few suggestions will be offered for your consideration.

REVELATION 21-22 and HEAVEN

“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. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’” (21:1-4).

The earliest and most persistent adversary (“satanas” - satan) of the early disciples was not Rome but the unbelieving Jews. They raised opposition wherever the gospel was preached inciting the Romans against the believers. John’s Revelation begins with the promise that Jesus was to come against the tribes (those that pierced him) and that they would wail/mourn. This would soon take place for the time was near (Rev. 1:1-7). The disciples would soon be vindicated for *“the God of peace will soon crush Satan (satan, the adversary, the unbelieving Jews) under your feet”* (Rom. 16:20). Revelation tells in veiled language for security reasons how that would be accomplished. After it all culminated in the destruction of the whole Jewish system of religion and political government through great tribulation in AD 66-70, Chapters 21 and 22 picture in language similar to that of Isaiah 65 the ending of one system and the confirming of a new one.

By any stretch of the imagination, can you believe that God destroyed this universe and created new heavens and a new earth when Israel was restored to their land? According to Peter (2 Peter 3), they were destroyed once before in the flood and also were to be annihilated again. Then a new heaven and earth were to come down out of a non-existent heaven. Even the most imaginative science-fiction writer would be at a loss to deal with all the details and ramifications of such a drama. Can we not agree that the concept of new heavens and a new earth depicted an imminent change of religious, social, and/or political order as in the time of Noah, the restoration of Israel to their land, and the change from the fleshly covenant to the spiritual covenant?

In dramatic, apocalyptic language, Peter also uses terminology of total annihilation of the physical universe with the replacement of heavens and earth. He relates it to the coming

of the Lord in the last days. Then he tells them to wait in readiness for it to happen. He wrote “WE” wait including himself; not THEY who would be living thousands of years from then. Are they still waiting? Like many other references to the coming of the Lord, he indicated that it would be in their generation.

The time of captivity in Babylon was painful. Rachel was weeping for her children (Jer. 31:15). Her children wept. *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!”* (Psa. 137:1-6). In prospect of their restoration Isaiah indicated that their time of weeping would be over. Their miserable state would be changed and forgotten in their “new heaven and earth.”

A similar circumstance is indicated in Revelation 21. The church had been in the throes of persecution and martyrdom. Jesus’ presence, or manifestation, through the Roman army wiped out the vestiges of that earthly system which had been vanishing away since Pentecost. The believers’ cause for tears from persecution and death from martyrdom was relieved.

The holy city, the new Jerusalem, was coming down from heaven, so it could not be heaven itself. The old Jerusalem, the harlot, the old Babylon representing Judaism had fallen. The Jerusalem John saw coming was heavenly, the fullness of the spiritual kingdom replacing the earthly kingdom. This is all in harmony with Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4:21-31:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the (then present-ch) present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. .. Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now (the time of Paul’s writing -ch). But what does the scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.’ So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”

As the Day was approaching, the writer of Hebrews assured that they had not come to quaking Mount Sinai, but, *“You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to the judge who is God of all, etc. .. His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire”* (Heb. 12:18-29). That was not written to you and me but to persons

living then who would see it transpire. In his exhortations the writer includes himself – “let us” rather than “let them” who may be living centuries later.

The Jews looked upon the Temple and the holy city of Jerusalem as the place of the Presence of God. However, that was being changed for he who sat on the throne declared, “*I am making everything new!*” and “*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. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (21:3-5 NIV). Believers were being confirmed as the new Temple, the new Jerusalem, and the new order of heaven and earth. The pain and tears brought by persecution and death by martyrdom instigated by the Jews was being eliminated in the “parousia.”

Peter had much to say about this newly developing order. For brevity we will look at only two references. “*Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. .. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:4-9). The total fleshly, earthly system was being replaced by the spiritual. That is what is being described in Revelation 21 and 22.

This is the culmination of the history of redemption. Believers are reconciled with God who dwells among his people and in each of us. All that keeps this from being what we think of heaven itself is our putting off of this physical body. At our physical death we do not go to God or heaven for we have been living in reconciled relationship with him and that is what eternal life and heaven are. The mission of the incarnation and supervision of the Spirit in bringing about the redemption of man is completed. Now we are in secure relationship with the One God of creation and revelation for eternity. We are the Temple in which he lives and he is the Temple in whom we live in true identity and relationship with God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6: 19; Rev. 21:3; 22:22). After all, these two chapters may offer the best glimpse of heaven we have!

There will be no need of evangelism in heaven, but in this new heaven and earth, “*The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price*” (22:17).

In this final chapter of the Bible, the seven churches were shown “*what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon.*” Also, “*Behold, I am coming soon.*” Again, “*He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*” (22:6, 12, 20). Were those false, inaccurate, or misleading promises? I won’t accuse the Spirit of deception! []

(Cecil Hook; November 2005)

“*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:24).

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!