

What Is Heaven Like?

(21:1—22:5)

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“Revelation as a whole may be characterized as *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the subtitle, *The Harlot and the Bride*” says G. R. Beasley-Murray.¹ We have seen the earthly city, Babylon, and her destruction. Now John describes the heavenly city, New Jerusalem.

John’s vision is of the “new heaven and new earth,” the “Bride,”² the wife of the Lamb. This is nothing other than God’s people, His church, now washed clean and made secure in His presence. The names of the tribes of Israel and of the apostles (21:12-14) show that this “city” is a figure of speech for the people of God under both covenants.

He is not describing just a “place,” but even more, a *condition*, of being redeemed from sin, of freedom from toil and persecution, of being in the eternal presence of God. He stretches language to the breaking point to describe it for us. We cannot expect an exact, literal description in human language, for this scene is too other-worldly for such mundane things.

A frequently-asked question is this: “What will heaven be like?” That is exactly what the vision in Revelation 21 and 22 describes.

HEAVEN IS BEAUTIFUL

John describes the “city” as “having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper” (21:11). He adds to this by referring to several other precious gems (21:18-21). It is evident that this is not a literal description; for we do not even know what gems John had in mind from the names he uses. But the point is well made: heaven is a *beautiful* place! It has none of the gaudiness and

cheapness of Babylon (17:4), only the beauty of God’s glory and of His presence.

One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple (Psalm 27:4).

Beholding the beauty of the Lord is the chief occupation in heaven.

Sometimes in this life we have difficulty distinguishing the truly beautiful from the merely gaudy, the valuable from the expensive, and the important from the urgent. In heaven, these distinctions are clear because only the beauty of God’s holiness is there.

HEAVEN IS BIG

An angel measures the city in order to impress John with its dimensions (21:15-17). It is impressive indeed! “Its length and width and height are equal” (21:16b), meaning it is a *cube*. This was also true of the “holy of holies” in the temple and the tabernacle. The “holy of holies” was regarded as the very dwelling place of God. That is what heaven is, and since the entire city is His dwelling place, no temple is there (21:22).

But notice the *size* of this cube! It is “12,000 stadia” (RSV; NIV) in height, width, and length. A *stadion* (“furlong,” KJV) was about 185 meters. Eight stadia would be about one mile.³ So the cube-shaped city which the angel measured was 1500 miles high, wide, and long! (See NASV.) Heaven is not just big—it is *enormous*!

What is the point of stressing the size of heaven? It is big enough for *everyone* who wants to go, and *plenty* of people will be there. In Luke

13:23 someone asked Jesus, "Are there just a few who are being saved?" Jesus disregarded the question because the questioner needed the higher truth that he must be sure to be one of them, regardless of their number. The answer to his question, though, is emphatically, "No!" Those who are saved will be *many*. It is true that Jesus said that "few" will find the way to life (Matthew 7:13, 14). But He is there speaking in comparative terms. Compared to the number who take the wide, easy path in life, those who are saved *will* be few. Still millions of saved people will be in heaven. John has already caught a glimpse of the saved (7:9, 10), and it was "a great multitude, which no one could count."

Regardless of the number, will *you* be among them? There is plenty of room if you want to be there!

HEAVEN IS NEW

Heaven will be "new" in every sense. The word *kainos* used here signifies not so much *chronological* newness (a new version of the same thing) as *qualitative* newness (new in kind).⁴ It is the difference between a "new" car, which may be like your old one, only a newer model, and a car unlike any other before it. The "new heaven and new earth" will not be just an updated version of the old, but it will be an entirely new realm of existence.

Heaven will be so new, that many of the most common experiences of this life will not be part of it. The saved will be perpetually in God's presence with no mourning, crying, pain, or death—"the first things have passed away" (21:1-5). As a younger man I had difficulty understanding how elderly people could frequently long for heaven. But the longer I live, the more ready I get! We all grow tired of witnessing (and experiencing) the ravages of sickness, pain, old age, and death. This tiredness helps prepare us for the wonderful newness of what lies ahead in heaven.

HEAVEN IS SECURE

God announces His own personal protection and promise of life to all who enter "New Jerusalem" (21:6, 7). In 21:12 John says that the city has a "great high wall," which is "seventy-two yards" (21:17). That is almost 250 feet thick! Every ancient city depended on a high wall as its first line

of defense. New Jerusalem has one unlike that of any other city ever known before.

But wait! Even though New Jerusalem has such a tremendously secure wall, verse 25 says that its gates are *never shut*! They are not shut by day, and night does not exist there. Why are they left open? Because in the presence of God and of the Lamb, nothing can harm us anyway.

Security is a big concern in our day. We try to buy it, invest in it, install it, save it, plan it. But there *is* no 100 percent security in this life. There *will* be in New Jerusalem.

HEAVEN IS PURE

Much of the glory of heaven lies in what *is not* there. Revelation 21:8 says, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." God is decreeing that those who have given themselves to the ways of the world will not live in New Jerusalem.

Nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come to it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27).

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying (22:14, 15).

This is both a *promise* and a *warning*—a promise that heaven will be free of those ungodly influences that sometimes make this life so difficult, and a warning that if we want to live in New Jerusalem, we have to abandon the ways of Babylon! We cannot hold dual citizenship. The sin and impurity of this world have to be put out of our lives through the power of Christ, or we cannot enter God's holy city.

Imagine a lovely antique jar, a real collector's item, is filled with all kinds of decaying matter and filth. You want to fill it with clean, white sand. No matter how much sand you pour on it, very little enters the jar. Not until you empty the jar of the one can you fill it with the other. Not until you empty your life of the pollution of sin can you be filled with the righteousness of Christ

and become fit to enter God's holy city.

HEAVEN IS COMPLETE

And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever (22:1-5).

Does this sound familiar? The whole scene is reminiscent of Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 3 we read of "Paradise Lost"; in Revelation 22 we read of "Paradise Regained." Heaven will accomplish the complete reversal of man's fall into sin; we will again experience complete and unhindered fellowship with God. It will never end, "and they shall reign forever and ever" (22:5).

Is this great hope just "pie-in-the-sky" thinking, as skeptics often charge? No, this is the ultimate fulfillment of God's act of creation, as He brings it back to where it started. This solution is a far more fulfilling, satisfying, and realistic one for the problems and fears of man than any solution man has come up with.

CONCLUSION

Why does John give such a lengthy, detailed picture of heaven? *To encourage us to hang on when life is its most difficult (2 Corinthians 5:16-18) and to make us want to go to heaven, to want to get ready if we are not ready.*

The choice is yours: Babylon or New Jerusalem? But is there really a choice?

Endnotes

¹Quoted in Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 371.

²See 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:21-33 for the idea of the church as the "bride" of Christ.

³D. H. Wheaton, "Weights and Measures," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, pp. 1638-39.

⁴H. Haarbeck, H. G. Link, C. Brown, "New," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 669ff.

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