

THE CASE FOR HEAVEN ON EARTH

Growing up, did you ever have questions, ever wonder about heaven? Did it ever really bother you? I think growing up, heaven disturbed me more than hell. If it's for real, who would ever want to go there? What a nightmare! That's what Mark Twain's Huck Finn thought. At the start of Huckleberry Finn, Huck tells us that he's staying at Widow Douglas' proper house where prayer and bible reading is done after supper. Widow Douglas had a sister, Miss Watson, who lived with them "a slim old maid, with goggles on," we're told. She talked first about "the bad place" and then she talked "about the good place." And she said, "all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever." It did not impress Huck. He wanted to be with his friend Tom Sawyer in the bad place [2-3].

Ponder that. If you think our worship services are rather long, what about a worship service that never ends? We sing "when we've been there ten thousand years," but will it be a place where we sit a lot, sing a lot, listen a lot, pluck your golden harp a lot, flit from cloud to cloud in tiresome monotony? Is that the shape of things to come? Everlasting terminal boredom? This morning I want to strip away the myths and whet your appetite for heaven, give you an apologetic for paradise, the case for heaven. Like a travel agent for King Jesus I want to set before you a paradise panorama. Like Moses I want to take you to the top of Mount Pisgah and give you a sneak preview of the promised land. I want to tell you about the most exciting place in the universe to come, the new earth.

I. THE NEW EARTH. None of this dematerialized fairyland stuff some Christians think of. You won't be sprouting angel wings and no tiptoeing through the cumulus. That's unbiblical balderdash. Jesus said: "The meek shall inherit the earth" [Matthew 5:5]. The Apostle John writes: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" [Revelation 21:1 cmp. Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; II Peter 3:13]. The Greek word for new, "kainos," refers more to a change of quality rather than essence. An old car can get spiffed up, fixed up, painted up, and overhauled so it looks like and smells like new and yet retains its same serial number; so this fallen world will get an unspeakably glorious purge and facelift and yet remain good old terra firma. It's not another world John envisions, but this heaven and this earth gloriously renewed [A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future, pp. 280, 284]. God is not going to scrap his good creation and throw the refuse on some cosmic garbage dump [1]. God trumpets the good news in vs. 5: "I am making everything new!" This is how Dr. Neil Plantinga sizes up the new earth: "Think what this means. It means Banff will be part of heaven, and Rocky Mountain National Park. Toronto, especially Ontario Place, will be included. So will Miami and Montreal. Patterson and Vancouver. There is an outside chance for Grand Rapids" [A Sure Thing, p. 269]. That's it! Everything made new! This world purified as never before.

Will there be animals in this heaven on earth? Isaiah's meticulous description of 11 different animals together with humankind in the Shalom filled new earth clearly points in that direction. "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb...and the nursing infant will play peek-a-boo over the hole of an Egyptian Cobra" [Isaiah 11:6 & 8]. All non-human creation, Romans 8 says, stands on tiptoe straining its neck waiting for the moment the sons of God are clothed with glorious new bodies and soaring eagles, scampering cheetahs, parrots and pandas are all reborn in the final new creation celebration [Romans 8:19-20]. The Bible says [Matthew 19:28], the world will be born again. It will be heaven on earth.

II. NEW CITY. At the center of this new universe will be a new earth and at the center of that new earth will be a brand-new city, a new civilization, Christ's breathtaking bride, the New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven" [21:2, 10] [2]. Our final destiny will not be up but heaven's city down here on earth. Scripture informs us of...

Its Massive Size [1,400 miles cubed, 21:16], very roughly like the distance from the Twin Cities west to Seattle South to San Diego and East to Dallas, and North again to the Twin Cities. But then don't forget the vertical, 1,400 miles straight up too.

Its Vast Population. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" [7:9]. This is the great promise made to Abraham, that his descendants will be unspeakably vast "as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore" [Genesis 22:17]. Heaven will not be under-populated.

Its Flourishing Fertility. John writes: "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yields its fruit [not once a year, but] every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" [22:2; cmp. Ezekiel 47:12 & Amos 9:13-15].

Its Irresistible Beauty [twelve gates of a single pearl, a city so awash with color and light that its streets looked paved with gold, 21:9-11].

Its Culture. Isaiah 60 speaks of camel caravans laden with gold and incense [60:6] and Spanish ships with their tall vast sails ablaze with light [60:8-9] bearing their cultural treasures magnetically pulled to the dazzling city of light. We read of Kings as sponsors of the arts and sciences in long processions are bearing "the wealth of nations" to the very throne of God [60:10-11 See Richard Mouw's amazing book, When the Kings Go Marching In, p. 26]. John reinforces and updates Isaiah's vision.

We read in Revelation 21:24 "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it" [cmp. 21:26]. God will not start over at ground zero, square one technologically. We will not have to reinvent the wheel, the light bulb, or the computer in the city of God. Rather culture will pick up where history left off. Adam's cultural assignment given in Eden to "fill the earth and subdue it" will still be in force [Genesis 1:26-28]. Revelation 22:3 says the curse on creation will be lifted. "No longer will there be any curse." Disinherited, hell's prisoners will fiddle their thumbs forever. But the meek shall inherit the earth. Beautiful, fun, and untiring work will go on forever. Work with our hands, yes. On gardens, on buildings, on fascinating machines. But also work with our minds. We won't be omniscient, know everything, suddenly when we enter paradise, but we can explore new worlds of knowledge and science with ever fresh intellectual pursuits. Can you imagine sitting in the lecture hall with Luther and Calvin, and Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon and Pascal and Jesus, too?! Imagine all the intellectual fireworks. All things new. Boredom will be banished forever.

III. NEW BODIES. This is our sure hope: abundant, fruitful life on a new earth in a new city, and now in the third-place *inhabiting* "new, free, powerful bodies" [A Sure Thing, p. 269]. John among other things says in vs. 4, "There will be no more death." And Paul writes: "The dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed! Death will be swallowed up in victory" [I Corinthians 15:51-54]. At 67 that's looking better to me all the time. Think of it! We will be forever young! With remade bodies, there's implications.

Think about Food! Food, glorious food! The Bible speaks of real bodies in a real place enjoying real food [Isaiah 25:6-8]. Like

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the resurrected Christ sipping wine and sinking his teeth into broiled fish and bread, our taste buds will still be in tact [John 21:9ff; Luke 22:16, 18; 24:24, 31, 35]. Imagine flaming fajitas, rice pilaf, hot potato and salad bars, savory shrimp for all feasting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the wedding supper of the Lamb [Matthew 8:11; Revelation 19:9]. *"Never again will they hunger!"* [Revelation 7:16]. The homeless in NYC & Chicago, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Haitian orphans scrounging for food scraps at the town garbage heap long for such a kingdom. *"The Kingdom of God is no soup line. It's an Italian blowout!"* [Tony Campolo].

Think about sports. Sport is forever! If not baseball, soccer, basketball, and hockey then sports beyond our wildest expectations. Zechariah 8:12 says that in the City of Truth: *"The streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."* And fishing! Ezekiel 47:10 tells us that because the river of life will flow, bursting with swarms of living creatures, the dead sea will be transformed. *"Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds--like the fish of the Great Sea"* [i.e., the Mediterranean].

Think about the music of paradise--not just you and me plucking our individualistic harps, but the New Jerusalem Symphony choir and orchestra sounding *"like the roar of rushing waters....singing a new song before the throne,"* a mighty choir and orchestra 144,000 strong [Revelation 14:1-3] [3].

And dance! David leading us in worship with moves and vaults more majestic than Barishkinov. Spanish Flamenco, Texas square dancing, Geneva and Irish Jigs. Even God will dance! Imagine dancing with God! Listen to Zephaniah 3:17 *"Yahweh your God is in your midst....He will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival"* [Jerusalem Bible]. No more CRC inhibitions. And no more sin of any kind. We will kick up our heels in the kingdom! This new city on the new earth with new bodies will bless the socks off you.

But now on a more somber note. Think of how deep a comfort this resurrection hope is. *"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst....And God will wipe every tear from their eyes"* [Revelation 7:16, 17b; 21:4]. Think of what that promise means to Syrian refugee orphans, Haitian or African or Hmong or Cuban Christians lost at sea? Think of what it means to you who grieve babies you never got to hold in your arms, parents who whispered holy prayers at your bedside, the loss of lovers who kissed away your tears and held you through the storms. Now they're gone and you hurt.

A few years ago, Eric Clapton wrote and sang a heart wrenching song: *"Tears in Heaven."* Eric Clapton's 4 year old son, Connor had died, falling out of his mother's friend's 53 story apartment building. Very shortly after the accident. It tore him to pieces. [**Listen a moment**] Clapton struggles with that existential question: *"Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?"* **Hinduism** says no. After eons of reincarnations our personal identities merge and vanish in Nirvana like drops in the ocean of the Cosmic One. **Atheism** says no. When you die, you rot and that's it. You're food for worms. Will we be able to recognize one another in the Kingdom? If the disciples could recognize Jesus after his resurrection and Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration, why would we think in the future Kingdom God would reinvent the faces of our friends so we couldn't know them from Adam? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be recognized in the Kingdom [Matthew 8:11]. Why not a reborn Peter, Paul, and

Mary? Circumstances may block us from seeing our loved ones here. But *"what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?"* [I Thessalonians 2:18-20].

IV. NEW VISION OF GOD. People, that outstanding city toward which we move will be a cultural extravaganza of dance and theater and feasting and music and learning and sport. Never a dull moment. As great as that is, that's not what makes me long most for paradise. You see, I am an incurable God-addict. I ache, I hunger, I crave for God. You do too. Augustine said it: *"Lord, you created us for Yourself. And our hearts are restless until we rest in You!"* The great miracle of Christmas is the living God took on flesh and blood and bone and became one of us. Call it the Emmanuel promise, God with us. But now here in Revelation at the end of history comes the mind-boggling fulfillment of the Emmanuel promise. John writes: *"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them and be their God'"* [Rev 21:3].

People this is what makes my heart beat wild with hope. The best is yet to come. To be ushered into that astonishing city of transparent glass [Revelation 21:11, 18, 21] so that whether we're working or playing, praising or feasting, I need only look to the center of the city, and feast my eyes on the Lord. *"The Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. And they will see his face"* [Revelation 22:3-4]. This is the beatific vision. You know the song. *"Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace forevermore, till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest, and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest."*

One of my favorite places on earth to vacation is Whistler British Columbia. Some people put their lives at risk when they say to another, *"Go to hell!"* Never say that. But at Whistler you can get sweatshirts that say, *"Go to heaven!"* Heaven. You can get from here to there. Put your trust in Jesus Christ. Believe He died for you to erase the debt of all your sin and rose again so you could begin a new life now. Trust Christ, then follow Him. That's the ticket. Not baptism. God has no grandchildren. Not church attendance, not going through the motions. Not religion, not ritual, but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus alone, plus nothing. Jesus said, *"I Am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* [John 14:6]. Neither is salvation in any other! I urge you. Go to heaven! It beats the alternative by a long shot.

[1] When Peter speaks of the coming fire of judgment with destroyed elements and vanished heavens in the best Greek manuscripts he never says the earth will be burned up [II Peter 3:10]. He says *"the earth and its works shall be laid bare"* i.e., all human achievement, all our works will be weighed in the balance of God's judgment. The quality of our work will be tested by fire. But creation will not be annihilated.

[2] Rapture theology speaks of the saints skyrocketing to heaven at Christ's return. Rapture theology was unthought of before the 19th century and the footnotes of the Scofield Reference Bible. It's true. We will be lifted-up temporarily to greet the Lord "in the air" but to welcome Him as He returns with the saints, just like the triumphant return to a city of a great Roman general and His army after a mighty victory. Such a "Roman Triumph" would be a figure of speech both Paul and the Christians at Thessalonika would be familiar [cf. I Thessalonians 4:13-28; II Corinthians 2:14; Philippians 3:20; Acts 1:11; H. Ridderbos, Paul, 535-6].