

REVELATION 21:1-8

WHAT WILL HEAVEN BE LIKE?

“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 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. 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.”

“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.’ 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. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 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.’”¹

One way to make scads of money is to write a book describing Heaven. If the writer presents himself or herself as a child, the fascination with what was purportedly seen is that much greater. Some years ago, a large charismatic church in a neighbouring community, hosted a man who claimed to have gone to Heaven. He claimed to have danced with his mother on a sea of glass. Accounts of his “trip” were published in the area newspapers, and his name was on the lips of many people. His account proved, it was claimed, that Heaven existed.²

For the record, I have no doubts of the existence of Heaven. The term “Heaven,” and its cognates, appears 286 times in 265 verses in the New Testament; apparently, God wanted His people to know of the existence of that place. The Master was quite certain when He spoke those comforting words, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going” [JOHN 14:2-4].

I am confident that Heaven is real. I am confident of its existence, not because some individual claims to have been to Heaven, but because the Word of God informs me of Heaven. We who are believers now “groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:2]. We have this longing because “We know that ... we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:1].

We know that just as Christ has been raised from the dead and has been seated at the Father’s right hand in the heavenly places, so we who believe know we have been raised up with Him, and we know we are now seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus [EPHESIANS 1:20; 2:6].

We know that “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” [PHILIPPIANS 3:20]. In fact, we are confident that we have a hope laid up in heaven [COLOSSIANS 1:5], and so we desire “a better country ... a heavenly one” [HEBREWS 11:16].

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² See Percy Collett, “I walked in Heaven with Jesus for 5½ days,” <http://percy-collett.com/>, accessed 26 December 2011

The child of God may be confident of the existence of Heaven. As the Apostle has said, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom” [2 TIMOTHY 4:18]. We who are born from above are assured that we have “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]” [1 PETER 1:4].

Let me emphasise at the outset that Heaven is where God is. To be with God is to be in Heaven. The one who is born from above does not fear death, though we cannot enjoy the process of dying. No one enjoys the prospect of ageing. However, we are confident that we are being equipped for our eternal dwelling place. The Apostle has declared, “We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8]. In another instance, Paul would testify to his personal desire when he says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” [PHILIPPIANS 1:23]. This is but a practical application of the Master’s declaration, “Where I am, there will My servant be also” [JOHN 12:26].

HEAVEN IS THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD — John makes it clear that Heaven is the dwelling place of God. The holy city, new Jerusalem, is declared to be “the dwelling place of God” [REVELATION 21:3]. This accords with the testimony of the Old Covenant writers. David states,

“The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD’s throne is in heaven;
his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man.”

[PSALM 11:4]

This agrees with his testimony in another of the Psalms:

“The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.”

[PSALM 103:19]

Isaiah, likewise, is inspired by the Spirit to write:

“Thus says the LORD:
‘Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is the place of my rest?’”

[ISAIAH 66:1]

The Master Himself testified that “[Heaven] is the throne of God” [MATTHEW 5:34].

After witnessing the unfolding panorama of this present Age of Grace, John was transported to Heaven. These are his words as he unveils the scene to our wondering eyes. “After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne” [REVELATION 4:1, 2].

HEAVEN IS DEFINED BY LIGHT AND BEAUTY — In the presence of God we shall be in eternal light. John states that in Heaven there is no night. “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb” [REVELATION 21:23]. Moreover, John testifies that “There will be no night there” [REVELATION 21:25]. This should not surprise any of us, for we are convinced that “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” [1 JOHN 1:5]. In fact, James calls God “the Father of lights” [JAMES 1:17].

When John had been called up to Heaven, witnessing God on His throne, it is significant that he cannot really describe what he saw. As Paul urged Timothy to continue valiantly in the contest for truth, he spoke of God. His words are worth pondering at this time. “As for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” [1 TIMOTHY 6:11-16]. What a powerful description—God, the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light. And thus it is that John speaks of colour—of jasper, carnelian and an encircling emerald rainbow [REVELATION 4:3].

HEAVEN IS THE ETERNAL HOME OF THE REDEEMED — Whenever I perform the funeral of one of God’s saints, as I commit the body to the ground from whence it came, I read the words of our text. “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. 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” [REVELATION 21:3, 4].

At this present time, our life is defined by sorrow, by tears and by death. Here, we know mourning, crying and pain. There is a place, however, where these are not even bad memories, “for the former things have passed away.” Those who love the Lord, who are called to pass through the waters of death, often have a moment when it seems as if the veil separating the present, dying world from that eternal home which is promised. Though science attempts to explain away some of the testimony of the redeemed, it remains that unexplained sights and unexplained sounds are frequently witnessed and spoken of by those who are passing into the unseen realm.

I have an aunt whom I never met. She died when just a young woman. It was in the days before penicillin and modern antibiotic treatments were available. She suffered a ruptured appendix and lingered briefly as septicemia ravaged her body. As she lay in a hospital bed in Pittsburg, Kansas, her father, my grandfather, was at her bedside. He reported that suddenly she opened her eyes and spoke with animation. “Oh, Daddy, can you hear them? Can you hear the sound? It’s the most beautiful singing I’ve ever heard. And, Daddy, can you see them? They are the most beautiful creatures I’ve ever seen. Can you see them, Daddy? It is so bright! It is so beautiful!” And with that, she slipped out of this life and into that life to come.

I don't believe it would have been possible to take away the comfort that her words conveyed to her father, my grandfather. He was convinced that she saw the angels of Glory coming to take her to her eternal home. He was convinced that she heard the singing of the redeemed, and saw the mansions of light. I don't doubt that she accurately related what she saw and heard, for multiplied others of the people of God have spoken of this moment of transition.

The words that conclude our text have provided deep comfort for many of the people of God. "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.' 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. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son'" [REVELATION 21:5-7].

What will Heaven be like? It will be a place of rest, for we shall have no more labours. It will be a place of light, for God is the light. It will be a place of beauty, for God is the source of all that is beautiful. It will be the eternal home of the blessed, for only those who are redeemed shall ever enter there. John testified that "Nothing unclean will ever enter [Heaven], nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life" [REVELATION 21:27].

The gate to Heaven is secured against all that attempt to gain entrance through their own effort. Christ, alone, is the One by whom each must enter. He invited all who are willing, saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" [JOHN 14:6]. There is no entrance to Heaven through the church, through religion, through rite or ritual. Only the twice-born may enter there; only those who have received Jesus as Master of life shall be welcomed into the eternal home. I pray that this includes you. Amen.