

The Hope of Heaven and the Habits of the Church

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I want to talk about heaven. I find it strange that, as a people whose hope is in heaven, we don't talk about it much. We are the only ones whose hope is centered on a destination, yet we spend very little time talking about and discussing or trying to understand that destination.

We need to understand it, however, because what we think about heaven is crucial to the way we live out our faith.

There are two mistakes we make when thinking about heaven. The first is that we think this world has already become so bad that nothing good can be found in it, so we stand on the corner doing nothing, waiting for the heavenly mini-bus to come and take us to be with Jesus.

Often, when that is our perspective, we become useless in this world. As the saying goes, “we become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good.”

We all know people who are very interested in spiritual things but who have no time for the practical side of faith. They always want to come to Bible study, but they won't lift a finger to help clean the church, to go on an outreach, or to give to the poor. They often will blame their inaction on God. “But you see,” they say, “God hasn't called me to those things. God has given me a ministry of rebuking.”

I am tempted to say to those people, “I think your Bible is missing some pages! Have you read James 2:16-17*? “...and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.”

That is the first mistake we make about heaven: forgetting that we are saved here on earth and that God expects us to be a blessing to others in the present.

The second mistake is the very opposite: to think that we can somehow have heaven right here on earth. There are two popular forms of this: the social gospel and the prosperity gospel. Both of these fail to understand that the earth and everything in it has been tainted by sin and is therefore corrupted. No amount of human effort can ever produce heaven on earth.

The prosperity gospel takes heaven and reduces it to an earthly standard. It tells us that the goal of the Christian life is to have nice things. I don't need nice things—I need eternal things. I have never seen a dead man driving his Mercedes to heaven. I need a God who can cure my sin problem, not my money problem. I need a God who can give me a home in heaven, not a house in the best neighborhood.

Understanding the biblical picture of heaven is crucial to living the life God has called us to, because the biblical picture of heaven is neither about escaping from this world, nor is it about making this world the ultimate thing.

*All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible Updated Edition, 1995, unless otherwise indicated.

If we truly understand the biblical picture of heaven, then it radically transforms our lives in the present. We, as the Church, are called to fully embody the characteristics of our heavenly destiny so that when people encounter us we can say in genuineness and in truth, “This is where healing and wholeness, where peace and righteousness and joy live!” In the presence of God’s people, unbelievers can come in and taste and see, as the Psalmist says, that the Lord is good!

Revelation 21 shows us five characteristics of a biblical view of heaven.

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, **4** and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” **5** And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.”

1. Heaven is the end of evil (v. 1).

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** (ESV).

Verse 1 ends with the curious statement that the sea shall be no more. To understand this we need to look back a few chapters, to Revelation 13:1:

And the dragon stood on the sand of the seashore. Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names.

In the Book of Revelation and in other places in Scripture (Job, Isaiah, Psalms) the sea is presented as the dwelling place of evil. And so when God says the sea will be no more, He is saying that evil will finally be destroyed.

Isaiah 57:20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
For it cannot be quiet,
And its waters toss up refuse and mud.

Remember, it was out of the sea that God delivered Israel in the Exodus. It was in the sea that God drowned Pharaoh and his army.

The idea behind evil being represented by the sea is that evil is, at its most fundamental level, disorder, confusion, and chaos.

We don’t have to look long or far to see the horrible effects of evil in our world. In World War II six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis. Here in Africa there has been no shortage of evil deeds, from the genocide in Rwanda, to the reign of terror by Idi Amin in Uganda during the 70’s. In Nairobi they are blowing up shopping malls. And in America children are shooting their teachers and classmates.

Ever since Adam and Eve's unfruitful decision in the garden, evil has steadily gained in popularity and influence.

When I consider these things, I long for the day when evil is no more. When I think about this verse, I look forward not only to the destruction of external evil—the evil that I see in this world, such as the evil of rape, the evil of war, the evil of child abuse, the evil of murder—I also look forward to the destruction of evil in my own heart.

2 Peter 3:13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (ESV).

I look forward to that day when my own heart is cured of the curse of evil. When I no longer get jealous when I hear about the success of my friends, but instead sincerely rejoice with them over what God has allowed them to accomplish. I look forward to the day when every thought I have is loving and kind. I look forward to the day when selfish ambition is gone from my thinking and when the glory of God consumes my every thought.

“...new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”! The vanquishing of evil! The truth is, when you and I live righteous lives, we point people to the new heaven and new earth that awaits us. When we take on righteousness, when we embody the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control—we reflect the heavenly city even as we wait for its coming.

2. Heaven is a place of community (v. 2).

And I saw **the holy city**, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Sometimes we have the idea that heaven is a place where we will sit on clouds playing harps. Or sometimes we hear worship leaders say, “Heaven is going to be a never-ending worship service.” Now, the problem with this is that eternity is a very long time, and so no matter how much you love sitting on clouds or having a worship service, after a while you will be bored.

We are told in the Book of Genesis that humans are created in God's image (1:26-27). That being the case, one of the qualities we possess is that of being in relationships. God himself exists eternally in relationship with the Godhead:

“Let us make man in our image.” God is a relational God and He begets a relational people. The problem, however, is that in the present all of our relationships are broken. Even our best relationships, no matter how good they are at times, are never perfect. They are always marred by sin and selfishness.

The future that awaits is a future that in some sense restores us to God's original intention:

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Ge 2:10, 11, 15-17, ESV)

We know from Genesis chapter 3 that Adam and Eve did indeed eat the forbidden fruit, and when they did, sin entered the world. From the very moment this happened God announced His plan to redeem and restore His creation! And we see that plan realized when we come to Revelation 22:1-5:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 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 (ESV).

In the beginning of God's creation, there was a garden divided by rivers and a tree of great significance. When we come to the end of the story, we have a city divided by rivers and a tree of great significance. The picture is not one of starting over but of going back to the original plan, and we see clearly that there is both continuity and change involved between the old earth and the new earth.

What does this mean to us? First, we have to be careful in reading Revelation not to take things too literally, because there is much symbolism in this book. While our future in God is pictured as a city, we shouldn't necessarily imagine skyscrapers and traffic jams. Rather, what makes it a city is people! The people of God, redeemed by God and living in harmony and in perfect fellowship with one another.

Our relationships are important. When we strive to have healthy relationships we point in some significant way to the future to which God is leading us. "...and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in **love for one another**, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you" (1Thess 3:12).

3. Heaven is the presence of God (v. 3).

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" (ESV).

Not only is heaven like a city, but it is a holy city. What makes it holy is that the primary characteristic of this city is that we will constantly enjoy the presence of God.

Verse 3 states three times that God will dwell with us forever and we will dwell with Him forever, and that this is the very essence of heaven.

As I studied this verse I asked myself, why did God find it necessary to repeat this single idea three times? And I think the answer is this: we cannot really comprehend what it means to continually be in the presence of God.

Remember what happened to Isaiah when he found himself in the presence of God? Isaiah 6:5 reads, "Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.'"

There have been times when my wife and I, during a church service or even in prayer in our own home, have experienced a mighty outpouring of God's presence, and the experience was overwhelming. At one point I remember telling her that I felt as though it would crush me. As sinful people, we simply cannot bear God's manifest presence.

But in heaven, when sin has been destroyed, we will again have fellowship with God just as Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden.

It is the glory and the presence of God that makes the city holy, and that makes it different from any city we can imagine. When we think of the city of Lomé, we might think of crime, or shanty compounds, or traffic, or noise, or any of those things that we associate with a large city. But that is because Lomé, just like New York or Los Angeles, is a city in which the glory of God, or the presence of God, is present only in part. That is because we are still contending with evil.

But in the heavenly city, we shall forever be in the presence of God. This is the single most important quality of heaven. In the presence of God we will live continuously in a state of unspeakable joy.

Several years ago my wife and I lost a son after a nine-month pregnancy to still birth. Shortly after his death and funeral, we returned to Zambia, where we were living at the time. One day as I was driving, just as we were approaching a police stop, I had a vision of my son in heaven. The most striking quality I noticed about my son in this vision was that he was consumed with joy—a type of joy that I had never seen before because it was pure, pure joy.

Jude 24 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy....

In Scripture, especially in the New Testament, joy almost always comes from one thing: presence. It comes from being in the presence either of God or of God's people. Church, if we want people to experience joy, if we ourselves need a little joy in our lives, then we need to cultivate the presence of God through holy living, through passionate worship, through heartfelt prayer.

4. Heaven is the end of death and suffering (v. 4).

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 (ESV).

Our entire lives in the present are surrounded by death and sickness and suffering. And all of that sickness and death flows from our rebellion against God and from the work of Satan in the world, who has corrupted God's creatures and God's creation.

But in heaven, one of the direct results of God's presence and God's glory will be that the enemy of our souls, the devil, will have been completely defeated, and if he has been defeated, then his work is also destroyed.

There's a song that says, "No more dying there, we are going to see the King." Heaven is a place where children will not die of malaria and we won't die of old age. It's a place where we won't get cancer or be run over by taxis or motos. I look forward to the day when we can call these things "the former things." I look forward to the day when we can look at all of our pain and heartache and sickness and say, "Oh—you are just a former thing!"

5. Heaven is our future—and our present (v. 5).

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” (ESV).

When we talk about the defeat of death and our relationship to heaven, we *must* understand that death has already been defeated. Therefore, heaven is not only part of our future, but also part of our present. In this verse God says to John in this vision, “*I am making* all things new,” not “*I will make* all things new.”

Why? Because the creation of the new heaven and new earth is not something that happens entirely in the future. There is a very real sense in the Bible in which the New Creation has already begun. And it began at the resurrection of Jesus. When was death finally defeated? When Jesus rose from the grave!

When Jesus gave to us the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also came to live in us—and we too have already started to experience the power of resurrection and renewal.

Remember, Paul said, “If any man is in Christ he is a new creation! Old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new!”

Romans 8:11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (ESV).

What does all this mean? It means this: Because we have the Holy Spirit, you and I are called to be a heavenly people—right here, right now. Our lives are meant to point forward to the reality that began at Jesus' resurrection and that will be fully realized when Jesus returns. We are called to be a people who put an end to evil, and a people of activity—a people who *do* something, not just a people who sit and wait for Jesus to come back and rescue us from this world that is falling apart. No! We are citizens of heaven, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God to raise the dead and heal the sick and cast out demons and be agents of God's work in the world until Jesus comes back and—once and for all—overthrows Satan and brings us all into the manifest presence of God!

Why is it important that the Church serve the poor? Because the Church is called to envision and embody the new heaven and new earth, to point to the coming Kingdom, the holy city in which righteousness dwells. Why is it important that we preach the gospel? Because salvation points to our final destiny when evil is destroyed and we dwell in the presence of God forever.

The Church is called to be forever pointing to the reality of the new heaven and new earth!
The Church is called to embody here and now the qualities of the coming Kingdom.

What should we do now?

1. Set our hopes firmly on heaven, because it is a place of incomparable riches, and it is where true life will be found.
2. Live in the present in such a way that invites outsiders into our communities.
3. In times of trouble, or difficulty, hold firm to this hope we have in heaven!