



There is an old saying you've probably heard, "We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future." In many ways, that saying is true. There are many things about the future we don't know. We don't know what kind of difficulties we'll have to face. We don't know what will happen to the economy. We don't know if the Giants will ever win another World Series! But despite all the things we don't know, we **do** know that whatever happens God is in charge. Ultimately the future is in his hands.

But there is a sense in which that statement isn't accurate. There is a sense in which we **do** know the future. In the book of Revelation Jesus pulls back the curtain and allows the apostle John to see something of what will happen in the future. He was told to write down what he saw so people like us could read about it. Some of the things are kind of scary, but in the end the future that awaits the follower of Jesus Christ is awesome. 1 Cor 2:9 says, "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*"

What's the most beautiful place you've ever been; a place so beautiful it almost knocked you over? It's a slum compared to what awaits us. What's the best party you've ever been to? It's a bore compared to what God has in store for his children. What's the most intimate moment you've ever experienced? As meaningful as it was, a single moment in the presence of God will be more fulfilling.

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about heaven, but in Revelation 21–22 the curtain is pulled back wide to give us a vision of what awaits us. Simply put, these chapters answer the question, what will heaven be like? Some people might wonder if that's even a question worth asking. But human beings think about the future as naturally as we breath. Every human being wonders if there is more than just this life. Over 75% of Americans believe there is a heaven. Even Woody Allen once said, "I don't believe in the afterlife, but I am bringing a change of underwear."

But shouldn't we focus more on making a difference now? The fact is, how we think about heaven impacts the way we live in the present. Our future hope gives the present meaning. If life is nothing more than a prison cell where we twitch and squirm until an unseen executioner arrives, then what's the use? Why fight anything? Why even care? Remember John was writing to people who were struggling to live out their faith in a hostile environment. Some faced execution if they didn't declare "Caesar

is Lord." Many must have wondered, is it worth it? If staying faithful to Christ could cost me my job or my marriage or my house or even my life, is it worth it? I'll let you decide for yourself the answer to that question.

"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. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 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, 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.' 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.' Then He said to me, 'It is done I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. 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.' Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, 'Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall. The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. And he measured its wall, seventy-two yards, according to human measurements, which are also angelic measurements. The material of the wall was jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundation stones of the city wall were adorned with every kind of precious stone The first foundation stone was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its

light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

"Then 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. 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. There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 21:1–22:5).

### Revelation offers three powerful images of heaven

God says, "This is what I have in store for those who overcome and stay faithful to me. This is what makes it all worth it." John describes something so wonderful that he stretches the limits of language. He blends the literal and symbolic. It's like he's trying to describe to a fetus what life will be like outside the womb. All the tiny child knows is darkness and fluid. You have to use images he can understand. That's what John does. He gives us these three powerful images of heaven.

#### Heaven is a new creation

The first image is of a new creation. This is the focus of verses 1–8. The biblical vision of the future isn't about the end of creation; it's about the beginning of creation, a new creation. God's story began with creation: "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*" (Gen 1:1). Now the story draws to an end with another creation: "*I saw a new heaven and a new earth.*" This is the fulfillment of an old prophecy. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "*Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth...*" (Is 65:17). The biblical vision of the future has never been an escape from creation as we know it, but it's a remaking of creation as we know it. The One who sits on the throne, the Alpha and the Omega says, "*I am making everything new.*" Notice the new creation has already begun. That's why Paul could write, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*" (2 Cor 5:17). When we put our trust in Christ, it's like some of the future leaks into the present! But it's not finished yet. Some day we're going to get new, glorified bodies to match what's happened in our heart. And the earth will also get a make-over. Paul wrote, "*The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*" (Rom 8:21). What will heaven be like? Heaven will be a new creation.

#### Heaven is a new Jerusalem

The second image is introduced in v.2 and described in great detail in verses 9–27. Heaven is a new Jerusalem, a Holy City.

Most of us don't think of cities as the ideal place to live. When we think of heaven, we tend to think of mountains and rivers and green pastures, but we don't think of a city. That's because all our cities are messed up. In chapters 2 and 3 we saw the the first readers of Revelation lived in cities like Ephesus, Smyrna and Laodicea. Cities were meant to be places of community and commerce. But these believers were being ostracized from all of that because of their faith. The power structures of their cities were under the spell of another city called Babylon, the Mother of Harlots, which embodied rebellion against God. But Babylon has fallen and here in John's vision of the future we see a new city that embodies everything you could possibly want in a city. You've heard of those studies that reveal the "best cities" to live in? Well, here is a city in a class by itself! Twice John says he sees this city "*coming down out heaven from God*" (21:2,10). Those words humble us because it tells us the city of the future is not our doing. It's not the result of some evolutionary progress or some genius of city planning. This city comes from God. It's made by God and it's given by God. What is heaven like? Heaven is a new creation. Heaven is a new Jerusalem; a holy city.

#### Heaven is a new Eden

Here is the third image, heaven is new Eden. This comes out in the first five verses of chapter 22. The first Eden was a beautiful, luscious garden where God placed Adam and Eve and told them to cultivate it. It had rivers flowing through it and a tree of life. Perhaps we should think of this new Eden as a beautiful urban park built within the city. In this new Eden, the crystal clear river of life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb down the middle of the street. It flows with the life of God. And there is a tree of life. Remember in the first Eden after Adam and Eve sinned they were cast out of the garden and the tree of life was blocked. But here all God's people have free access to it. And it's loaded with fruit. You've heard of the "fruit of the month club." Well, this tree has twelve kinds of fruit, one for every month! Somehow its leaves bring healing to not just a select few, but to all the nations of the earth. In the first garden, the ground was cursed so that it produced thorns and thistles, but here the curse is gone. Darkness is gone. There is no more night because God himself gives light.

Heaven is a new creation, a new Jerusalem, a new Eden. But what does that really mean? What does all this say about what heaven is like? There's so much packed into these chapters that it would take us a week to dissect it all. But let me give you a few general statements about the kind of place heaven is based on these chapters.

#### Heaven is a real place

First of all, heaven is a real place. Some people think about heaven as a state of mind or a non-physical realm—not somewhere you go, but some esoteric, undefined existence. But John describes

something material. There is a “creatureliness” to what he sees. “Stuff” is there. There are stones and gems and streets. There are walls and gates. There are fruit trees and a river. Someone has said that the Christian faith is the most materialistic of all faiths. In a way that’s true. The Christian vision of the future is just so earthly. George Ladd wrote that the Bible “always places man and woman on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.” God made us for earth and he’ll fulfill that original intent by placing us on a new earth. Our destiny is **not** to go to heaven. Our destiny is for the heavenly city to come down to us. Our vision of the future is **not** other worldly; it’s new worldly. And we’ll not be freed from our bodies; we’ll get new bodies, like the one Jesus had after he was raised up. Remember what his risen body was like? It was him. Flesh and blood. Scars. They touched him. They talked with him. They saw him eat. It was the same body but it was new and different.

### **Heaven is a sacred place**

Second, heaven is a sacred place. The thing that dominates this description of heaven is the presence of God. John sees the holy city coming down and he hears a loud voice saying, *“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” (verses 2-3)*. This is the fulfillment of all the covenant promises reiterated for centuries. In 22:3 it says, *“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city.”* But down in v.22 the most remarkable statement is made, *“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”* For a Jewish man like John, the temple is the place where God dwells. For him to say there is no temple is unthinkable. If there is no temple, where is God? But what John is really saying is that the whole city is the temple. God’s dwelling place is no longer a place in the city, but it’s the city itself! That’s what’s being communicated in verses 16-17 when he gives the measurements of the city. John speaks of it as being laid out as a square cube. Do you know what else was a cube in the Bible? The Holy of Holies in the temple was a cube (1 Kings 6:20). That was the sacred place where God dwelt. Once a year the High Priest went in there on the day of atonement. But here the city is the temple. So when you’re in the city you’re in God. That’s a mind blower. Listen to what Gerhard Krodel says, “The negative aspect of the city is stated: There is ‘no temple’. Stated positively the whole city is engulfed in the glory of God radiating in it and from it. The saints no longer stand ‘before’ God but live ‘in’ God, being completely surrounded by God, even as God lives ‘in’ them.” There is some mystery here. I’m not sure we can grasp all of this.

### **Heaven is a safe place**

Third, heaven is a safe place. Each of us lives with a certain amount of fear. Anything can happen to us. The world is full of

things that threaten. But John says when the new heavens and the new earth replace the old, *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (v.4)*. Why is that? Because there will be no more sin or crime, no litter or smog, no oil spills, no sickness or disease, no betrayal or bickering. Think of all the folks that will need to find new jobs: exterminators, counselors, insurance adjustors, doctors, mechanics, policemen, health inspectors, maybe even pastors!

There is another image here that communicates safety. John says on the new heavens and new earth *“there was no longer any sea.”* That’s kind of a bummer, don’t you think? I love the sea. How can there be no sea in heaven? But in the Bible, the sea represents the forces of chaos. It’s unpredictable. It can rise up and wipe out hundreds of thousands of people like we’ve seen in recent years. Remember here in Revelation it was the beast who came up out of the sea. When it says *“there was no longer any sea”* it’s another way of saying in the new creation the forces of chaos are gone. No more typhoons and earthquakes. No more jumbo jets plunging 24,000 feet per minute into the ocean. No more children accidentally killing each other with their parents’ loaded guns. No more disgruntled employees barging into your office and mowing people down with an automatic rifle. Heaven is a safe place.

### **Heaven is a spectacular place**

Heaven is also a spectacular place. John describes the spectacular beauty of heaven as having walls of precious gemstones, streets of pure gold and gates of pearls. What will make heaven most spectacular is the radiant glory of God that will replace even the sun’s light. Reading through these chapters you can’t help but see there is a lot of glory in heaven. The Greek word for glory is *doxa* and it means “heavy, weighty.” It points to the weightiness of God’s person. Glory radiates from his being. It’s what makes him God. But v.23 tells us with more specificity where this glory comes from. It says, *“The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”* It’s like John is dazzled by the glory that lights up the city but he can’t figure out where it all comes from. He looks high and low and finally he sees a figure out of which all this light is pouring forth, and he cries out with recognition, “It’s the Lamb! The lamp is the Lamb!” The lamp giving off all this light is One you would least expect; it’s the One who was slaughtered for our sins. It’s the crucified Savior! There is no higher affirmation of the person and work of Jesus Christ to say he’s the source of the glory of God.

### **Heaven is a spacious place**

Not only is heaven a spectacular place, it’s a spacious place. Verse 16 says, *“[This city] will be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long.”* That’s 1,400 square miles, the distance

from Mexico to Canada or from the Appalachians to California. And this space will accommodate all who come. Jesus once said, *"In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places"* (John 14:2). We see this down in verses 24–26. It says, *"The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it."* This is another way of saying all the different people groups of the world will be represented there. Heaven is big enough for the full range of the world's ethnic and cultural diversity. The gates of a city were typically closed at night to keep foreigners out. But the gates of heaven will never be shut. There is no immigration problem there; no border patrol. It's like all peoples will be welcome and they will bring with them all the beauty of their culture. I don't believe our cultural distinctions will be obliterated in heaven. They won't divide us like they do now. They will be celebrated and appreciated.

### Heaven is a serving place

Heaven is also a serving place. I hope you didn't miss it. In 22:3 it says *"his servants will serve him."* Then in v.5 it says *"they will reign forever and ever."* This is hinting at the fact that heaven won't be like an eternal day off. We'll serve him. He'll give us assignments. We know that in the first Eden there was work to do. Work was a part of paradise. God told Adam to care for the earth and to cultivate it. In the new Eden there will be work as well. It won't have the drudgery attached to it that our present work has. It will be joyful, creative and productive work. Dallas Willard writes, "We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join...in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. It is for this that we were each individually intended, as both kings and priests. Thus, our faithfulness over a 'few things' in the present phase of our life develops the kind of character that can be entrusted with 'many things.' We are, accordingly, permitted to 'enter into the joy of our Lord'. That 'joy' is, of course, the creation and care of what is good, in all its dimensions. A place in God's creative order has been reserved for each one of us from before the beginnings of cosmic existence." Won't it be fun to find out what kind of assignment you'll have? And the thing is everyone will love their assignment! There won't be any whining, "Oh no, I have to do that?" No! It will be, "That's the perfect job for me."

### Heaven is a satisfying place

One more thing about heaven: Heaven is a satisfying place. We've seen the abundant provisions in Revelation 22:1–2: the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. Not only will heaven not have **loss**, it will not have **lack**. Every need will be met. Today, 800 million people will go to sleep hungry; one in six people in the world live in extreme poverty, under \$1 a day. These things will not be so in heaven. Heaven will be a place of life, fruit, and fullness; there will be no lack, no longing, no have-nots. All will be satisfied in heaven.

But do you know what will bring the most satisfaction? It's found in v.4. It says *"They will see his face..."* Can that really be? The whole Bible up to this point has stressed that no one can see God's face and live (Ex 33:20). But here, in that very real place we call heaven we'll see his face. The reason we'll be able to see his face is that we ourselves will be changed. In one of his letters John wrote, *"...when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).* So seeing him will change us into his likeness and being changed will allow us to continue to see him face to face. Nothing can satisfy more than that.

### Conclusion

Heaven is a wonderful place; an amazing place. A new creation, something real. A holy city where God dwells, a place that's spacious and spectacular. A satisfying new Eden where we serve him. But here is the question I want to leave you with: what excites you more, all the wonderful things about heaven, or the One you'll get to see in heaven? John Piper asks, "The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?"

It reminds me of an old song we used to sing: "Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with his glory and his grace, I want to see my Savior's face, heaven is a wonderful place." In the end **he** is what makes it worth it. **He** is why we will continue to follow him regardless of the cost.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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