

# 13



## The New Heavens and New Earth

### Review

In chapter 12, I described many of the events that will occur when Christ comes again on Judgment Day. For unbelievers who do not know him, his return will be unexpected and sudden. It will be like a thief in the night—just as it was to unbelievers in the days of Noah and Sodom. They were living ordinary lives when judgment suddenly came upon them. On the other hand, for believers who know and are expecting him, his return will not be a surprise.

### The Glory of Heaven

As a human being, Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah. But he was also the eternal Son of God. Before his incarnation, he dwelled with God the Father in a loving relationship. When he was on this earth and about to be crucified, he looked forward to returning to the glory he had experienced in heaven with his Father. One could say he was a bit homesick. He also looked forward to his second coming, when he would take his people to be with him in heaven to see his glory with the Father. While praying to his Father, Jesus taught:

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. . . .

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am [in heaven], *to see my glory* that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:4–5, 24)

When we join Christ in heaven, we will see the glory he had with the Father before the creation of the world. We will also be in the very presence of God the Father. In fact, the new heavens and new earth can be referred to as the Father's heavenly home, or dwelling place.

Biblical scholars disagree as to whether or not the Genesis earth will be purged by a surface fire on the last day and the new earth is to be a restored earth, or if the current earth will be totally annihilated and replaced with a truly new earth. The trend among evangelical theologians today is to envision the eternal kingdom of heaven as a restored earth. When Christ returns, both the Son of God and God the Father come down to our restored planet to dwell with the children of God. We will see the glory of the triune God on this restored Genesis earth.

But Jesus taught that we are destined to dwell with the Father in his *heavenly* home, not that he and his Father are coming to dwell with us in our home on this restored planet. It is hard to imagine that God in all his glory could dwell on this Genesis earth—even if it were a restored earth.

The first verse of the Bible teaches that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The Genesis creation then existed as a real place for mankind in space and time. It had a real presence before God. But God remained in his dwelling place in heaven as mankind dwelled on this earth. In Revelation, John described the utter annihilation of this Genesis creation: “From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them” (20:11). After the termination of this planet and the universe, the Genesis creation ceases to have a “presence” before God. It has “no place” in space and time. God then makes all things new when he creates the new heavens and earth as the eternal home for his children. Only this time, the children of God will dwell with God himself on the new earth. Therefore, the children of God must be destined for a totally new cosmos that will replace the one completely destroyed.

In the garden of Eden, one finds the Son of God walking and conversing in fellowship with Adam. The Son of God even appeared to

Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Theologians refer to these appearances as theophanies. And, of course, through the incarnation, the Son of God dwelt among us as a fully incarnate human being. But notice that throughout the Scriptures, God the Father is never depicted as setting aside his glory and dwelling on the Genesis earth with mankind. When he does communicate with man, it is usually through a voice heard from the heavens. The Father always remains in his dwelling in heaven.

As transformed sons of God in glorified bodies, however, we will be able to actually dwell with the Father in all his glory. The apostle John revealed an extraordinary change in habitat, explaining that when we enter the new heavens and new earth, we will be dwelling in the very presence of God the Father, as well as the glorified Christ. Immediately after describing the end of this Genesis creation and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, Revelation proceeds with a description of the New Jerusalem and our being in the presence of God the Father and Christ. Notice that the New Jerusalem comes down to the new earth, not to a restored Genesis earth:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, . . . And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. . . . they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” . . . And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new [the new habitat for the sons of God].” . . . The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. . . . And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty [the Father] and the Lamb [the Son]. (Rev. 21:1–7, 22)

The new earth will be a categorical change in type of dwelling place because we will be in the presence of God the Father in his full glory. We must receive a glorified body like Christ’s in order to dwell with the Father. The new earth must be an entirely new creation made suitable for both God the Father and his transformed children, where we will dwell together as never before.

Therefore, whenever we are described in the Scriptures as actually dwelling in the presence of God the Father, we can legitimately say we

are destined to dwell in heaven, the Father's heavenly home. We will still be embodied creatures in a real place. But we just do not know what kind of bodies we will have and what that place is going to be like because the eternal dwelling place for the sons of God has not yet been created.

### **The Son of God Creates the New Earth**

Christ, as the eternal Son of God, claims to be the "Alpha" of this Genesis creation whereby he was the specific person of the Godhead that brought the heavens and the earth into existence. He also claims to be the "Omega" of this Genesis creation when he says the word and brings it to an end. And he is responsible for making all things new when he creates the new heavens and new earth as the eternal dwelling place for the transformed sons of God:

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. . . . And he [the Son] who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new [the Son creates the new earth]." . . . And he said to me, "It is done! [The Genesis earth and the human experience come to an end.] I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning [of this Genesis creation] and the end [of this Genesis creation]." (Rev. 21:1-6)

As Peter says, God created this Genesis creation *by his word (ex nihilo)*, and one day he will simply say the word again and it will cease to exist:

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God [the Alpha], . . . But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire [the Omega], being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly [on Judgment Day]. . . . But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:5-13)

By the Son's word that can create, destroy, and create anew, Christ will create a totally new heavens and new earth adapted for God's chil-

dren. A new order of being in a new kind of eternal body necessitates a totally new creation. The sequence of events can be outlined as follows:

- The Son of God creates this Genesis creation out of nothing for his delight and glory.
- The Son of God restores this Genesis creation during the millennium for his glory.
- The Son of God annihilates this Genesis creation.
- The Son of God raptures the children of God into glorified bodies so that they can dwell with the Father.
- The Son of God then creates a totally new eternal habitat and dwelling place for the eternal sons of God.

There will certainly be some continuity with this Genesis creation, given that the eternal kingdom will be a new version of the current heavens and earth. And it will be a real place for real resurrected beings in real bodies. In Romans 8, Paul says that the current Genesis creation is groaning to transcend its current bondage to decay and somehow become a part of the eternal kingdom. How this all plays out in the end remains a mystery.

As Paul taught, we cannot examine the current natural body to determine what kind of immortal bodies we will have. So, too, we cannot examine the current planet to determine what kind of eternal habitat we will inherit. I am not sure that a verbal description of our future home would be helpful at this time anyway, which is why Revelation 21 and 22 relate an almost indescribable New Jerusalem that defies the laws of gravity and physics.

### **The New Jerusalem**

John described a magnificent New Jerusalem that comes down to the new earth after the current heavens and earth are destroyed:

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. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God [to the new earth], *prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* (Rev. 21:1–2)

John then described a vision of a cubed city with streets of gold and with foundations, walls, and gates made of a vast array of precious stones and minerals. The nature of this eternal city of God is another subject that has puzzled biblical scholars over the years. Is it a physical city with real streets of gold, or is John's vision a figurative description of a celestial city that is essentially indescribable at this time without the use of metaphors?

Some theologians believe that John was depicting a literal cubed city with actual streets of gold and gates of pearls. But the fact that John depicted the New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ should make us cautious not to interpret this description too literally. In fact, there are other indications in John's description of this city that tend toward a more figurative representation of this future heavenly dwelling place. For example, unbelievers outside the city gates are described as dogs:

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

If the streets and gates are to be interpreted literally, will there also be real dogs outside the gates? I don't think so. The dogs are a metaphorical representation of evil people who are excluded from entering the city of God. In fact, at this point in Revelation, the unrighteous will be in the lake of fire—not outside the gates of the eternal city. If the dogs are a metaphor for unrighteous unbelievers kept outside of heaven, then the gates and streets, as well as the cube-shaped city itself, are most likely metaphors as well. But that does not mean the city described is not an actual place.

What makes this analysis so difficult is that John also referred to objects in the New Jerusalem, such as the tree of life, that we recognize from other scriptures as real. For example, we know from Genesis that in the garden of Eden there was a real tree of life with real fruit. Let's read the Genesis account:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food [common trees]. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden. (Gen. 2:8–10)

These two trees were real trees with real fruit in a real place. But they imparted more than mere food for the body. Presumably, the fruit from the tree of life has something to do with Adam and Eve being able to live immortal lives. The fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil also imparted spiritual qualities that went far beyond nutritional food for the body. These two trees were not metaphorical, even though they had transcendent qualities.

If the tree of life is real in some sense, then the New Jerusalem would also be a real place. Just as our spiritual bodies are going to be real bodies or containment vessels of some unknown kind, our eternal home will also be a real dwelling place for our resurrected eternal bodies.

### **The River of Life**

John also described a river of life coming from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem, with the tree of life along its banks. Is this a real river, like the tree of life, or is this a metaphor for the flow of life from the Holy Spirit? John wrote:

“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.” . . . 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. (Rev. 21:6; 22:1–2)

So how do we interpret the meaning of this river flowing from the throne of God? Is it a real river of some kind, or is it simply a metaphor for the spiritual life that flows from God? Or is it both, in the same way

that the tree of life in the garden of Eden was a real tree that also had a spiritual dimension to it? There is definitely a metaphorical aspect to the river of life, for Christ used the same expression to describe the flow of spiritual life from the Holy Spirit into our hearts. This living water, however, does not flow from an actual river:

On the last day of the feast, . . . Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

In his gospel, John interprets the expression “rivers of living water” as the flow of spiritual life from the Holy Spirit, which began at Pentecost. Applying this interpretation to Revelation, “the river of the water of life, . . . flowing from the throne of God” corresponds to a phenomenal flow of spiritual life from the Holy Spirit. If we interpret the river of life in the New Jerusalem as an actual river with real trees along its banks, we could be seriously underestimating its meaning as a symbol of the flow of spiritual life from the Spirit of God. On the other hand, this river and the tree of life bearing fruit along its banks could be real in some unknown sense and may represent a supernatural phenomenon that cannot be comprehended until we inherit the eternal city. Again, from the Genesis account, we know that the tree of life was a real tree with real fruit, even though it had a profound spiritual dimension to it.

In fact, there are some other very interesting parallels between the garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem. A river flowed out of Eden that was essential to the natural life of the garden. Likewise, a river flows from God himself into the New Jerusalem that will be essential to our eternal life on the new earth. The New Jerusalem will be a new kind of eternal paradise for the sons of God, patterned in some fashion on this Genesis creation. Perhaps metaphorical comparisons to this creation are the best way for God to communicate to earthlings whose only frame of reference is this earth.

## The New Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ

John used another important biblical metaphor when he described the New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ. Human marriage is a typology of the church as the bride of Christ and is one of the most interesting typologies in the Scriptures. A wife is joined to her husband in the most loving and intimate form of companionship. So, too, our relationship with Christ is an intimate companionship. Obviously, our oneness with Christ is of the spirit, not of the flesh: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . But he who is joined to the Lord becomes *one spirit with him*” (1 Cor. 6:15–17).

John described the New Jerusalem as the bride coming down out of heaven to consummate the wedding of Christ and his bride. But since Christ is holy and perfect, and we remain blemished by sin in this life, the wedding cannot be consummated until the church has been perfected and purified. This occurs on Judgment Day when Christ judges our works, burning off our bad works through a process of purification and then rewarding us for our good works. With these rewards, we are then properly clothed and adorned for the wedding, prepared as the pure and radiant bride of Christ. The wedding procession between Christ and his body can now begin:

“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—*for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*  
(Rev. 19:7–8)

In effect, today we remain engaged to Christ, with the wedding to be consummated only after we are made holy—like Christ—on the last day. This is the final wedding procession, as the holy and pure bride made suitable for Christ comes from God the Father, who gives the bride away:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. . . . “Come, I [an angel] will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. (Rev. 21:2, 9–11)

John described a wedding procession, as the bride comes down out of heaven from God the Father. The Father chose the members of the bride for his Son, and now he gives away the bride to his Son. The radiant jewels represent the rewards for the saints as they enter into an eternal relationship with Christ. Like a bride on her wedding day, the bride of Christ is as radiant as precious jewels.

In Roman times, the women were known for wearing extravagant clothing and jewelry, particularly on their wedding days. They would be adorned with gold and jewels from head to toe. Some Gentile converts were so obsessed with extravagant clothing and jewelry that they presented a problem for the early church, which was made up of converts from all social-economic strata, including slaves. Paul addressed this issue: “Women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (1 Tim. 2:9).

In the ruins of Pompeii, an ancient Roman city buried under volcanic ash in AD 79, archaeologists have found an unusually large amount of gold jewelry, which helps us understand the problems Paul was confronting. Excavated jewelry includes gold hair braids, earrings, necklaces, upper armbands, forearm bands, wristbands, rings, belts, anklets, and even toe rings. Many of these gold adornments were encrusted with pearls, emeralds, and other precious stones. One can only imagine what a Roman bride might have looked like on her wedding day, dressed in her finest clothing and wearing her finest jewels.

John also compared the bride of Christ to a magnificent city. Many Roman cities had areas of slums, but compared to the rest of the ancient world the Romans were known for their beautiful cities of great architecture and streets paved with stones. They built magnificent aqueducts and paved canals to carry fresh spring water from surrounding mountains into

the city. This spring water supplied baths, public fountains, and private households throughout the city.

John merged the image of a lavishly adorned bride of the Roman world with a magnificent ancient city, with its foundations, walls, gates, and streets made of the purest gold and every kind of precious stone one can think of. Like a bride, this jeweled city is decked out from head to toe—from its foundations to its walls, gates, and streets:

The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, 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 of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. (Rev. 21:19–21)

John’s vision draws upon the magnificent Roman architecture and city planning of his day, as well as the beauty of a Roman bride adorned in splendor on her wedding day. Understanding the Roman setting in which John was writing is the key to understanding his vision of the New Jerusalem as a bride on her wedding day. The New Jerusalem in her magnificent jewels is arrayed like a beautiful bride, representing the consummation of the wedding of Christ and his bride, the church.

### Summary

God the Father has been planning the wedding of Christ and his bride since before the foundation of the world. The 1,000-year restoration will be the rehearsal dinner. Our experience of the magnificent city of the restored earthly Jerusalem on the restored earth during the millennium will enable us to better foresee the incomparable beauty and joy of the future New Jerusalem on the new eternal earth.

The New Jerusalem on the new earth represents the consummation of the marriage between Christ and his bride. Today we remain betrothed, or engaged, to Christ. On the last day, we are judged and made pure; our righteous deeds will be rewarded like jewels. We can then experience the consummation of the wedding with Christ, “for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.”