

Sermon – 29/06/2008 am

A New Heaven & New Earth

Study Text: Revelation 21:1-3

The thought of something new is always exciting. It may be a new dress, new car, a new house or just a new breakfast cereal. We are never satisfied with the old but always looking for something new. It can be this way with religion. People want something new. Why do we want something new all the time? Clearly the old things are satisfying us. The world we live in is not perfect. The things of this world are not fulfilling our deepest desires.

He who sat on the throne said *Behold I make all things new* (21:5). The throne is the throne of God in heaven. God created this world and put man in charge; but man rebelled against his maker. God's wrath came upon man and the whole creation. *Cursed is the ground for your sake...by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread* (Genesis 3:17, 19).

Living under the curse of God is not pleasant. Man seeks release from this curse in his own creativity and pleasures. But only God can release us from this curse. This he has done in Jesus Christ (Revelation 22:3). In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God has removed the curse (Galatians 3:13) and inaugurated the making of all things new.

This new creation has begun in the place where the old creation was corrupted – the heart of man. *If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation: the old has gone and the new has come* (II Corinthians 5:17). One day all creation will be made new. *The creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God* (Romans 8:21).

New Heaven and New Earth

John saw a new heaven and new earth for the first heaven and first earth had passed away (21:1). We come to a new chapter but not a new vision. In verse 9 an angel invites John to come up and see a new vision. What has John seen thus far in this vision? He saw Satan, the beast and the false prophet thrown into the lake of fire. All people bearing the mark of the beast, rather than having their name in the book of life, have been cast into the lake of fire (20:15). Death itself has been cast into this fire. The forces of evil and the power of death have been destroyed. Can you imagine a world without evil, without lies and corruption, and without death? It would be a world very different to what we live in today.

When the Lord appeared on the great white throne, earth and heaven fled from his face (20:11). The corrupted old creation could not exist in the presence of the holy God. Again John tells us that the first earth and heaven have passed away (21:1). They have disappeared or gone away.

The apostle Peter writes of the day of the Lord in the same way – *the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the elements will melt in the fervent heat...both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up* (II Peter 3:10). He goes on to speak about these things being 'dissolved'.

Around 70% of the earth's surface at present is covered by sea. The sea is not the natural habitat of man, even if many like to live by the sea, paying millions of dollars for 'ocean views'. Imagine if all the oceans were drained. A lot of people would be unhappy. But then again, they are also unhappy that sea levels may rise.

In the Bible, and especially in this book, the sea is associated with things evil. We saw sea merchants being seduced by the great harlot. The beast comes out of the sea (13:1). The crashing waves and murky depths threaten man with death (20:13). In the new earth there will be no more sea (21:1). The beast has been destroyed as well as the merchants. Even death has been destroyed (21:4).

Scholars argue about the newness of this new heaven and new earth. Will the old be utterly destroyed or will it be restored or renewed. Peter certainly writes as if nothing is left with words like 'burned up', and 'dissolved', but elsewhere the words 'regeneration' and 'restoration' are used (Matthew 19:28, Acts 3:21). Some scholars point out that in the Greek there are two words for new and the one used here (*kainos*) means newness in quality not in time. It is of course still called 'earth' and God did make the first earth, but we must remember we are no longer the perfect beings God created and this earth is no longer the perfect place that God created.

The new heaven and new earth will be radically different. For one thing there will be no more sea. Moreover, Isaiah says *the former will not be remembered or come to mind* (Isaiah 65:17) and that *the heavens will vanish like smoke* (Isaiah 51:6). Whatever continuity there is, and there will be a continuity just as we have seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our own 'new creation', there will be a radical discontinuity. The main thing about the new earth is that it will remain forever (Hebrews 12:27). Let us not start thinking like humanists and some cults that the new earth will be much the same as the old. Do the Jehovah's Witnesses still have those pictures of heaven with a beautiful little cottage in the woods and all the birds and animals gathered around?

New Jerusalem

Many years ago I was telling a friend how I hated living in the city. They reminded me that in the Bible heaven is described as a city. John tells us he *saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God* (21:2). This city is described in greater detail in the next vision. Yes it is a city and not a mountain, not a forest, not a desert, and not a cottage by the sea that symbolizes heaven.

Why a city you might ask. Can a city be beautiful? A city is full of people and the things man has made – how can that be like heaven! But this is not any city – it is the New Jerusalem. It is the holy city where only redeemed people, people who are new creation in Christ Jesus reside.

The earthly Jerusalem that is in Palestine was the place God chose for his holy presence to be among his people. The temple was there and in the temple was the Ark of the Covenant, and above the ark was the mercy seat. God's presence is no longer in that earthly temple and will not return there. People of various religions flock to Jerusalem today but what they see bears little resemblance to the New Jerusalem seen in this vision. They may live in hope of the temple being rebuilt in Jerusalem but it is a vain hope for the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48).

In these last days God came to earth, dwelling among us in the person of Jesus Christ. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory as of the only begotten of the Father* (John 1:14). The glory of God was revealed in Jesus Christ. After his resurrection Jesus returned to heaven and sent the HS to dwell in believers (John 14:17). So it is that we, individually but also corporately, are the temple of the HS (I Corinthians 3:16). Corporately we are the church of Jesus Christ. *We are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit* (Ephesians 2:22).

It is no longer Jerusalem and the temple there in Palestine but the church, the body of Christ, in which God tabernacles/dwells today. The church includes Jew and Gentile. The church is the *New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband* (21:2).

Jesus contemplated this great day, even as he sat with his disciples in the upper room contemplating the cross. He said *I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes* (Luke 22:18). He spoke further of them eating and drinking in this kingdom (Luke 22:30).

In a vision John saw the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7). The bride was made ready, the bride whom he now sees coming down out of heaven from God to be joined together for ever with her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ (Isaiah 62:5). ‘Throughout history God is forming his people to be his bride so that they will reflect his glory in the ages to come (Ephesians 5:25), an idea developed in what remains of Revelation 21’.

New Covenant

At the Last Supper Jesus declared *this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you* (Luke 22:20). A covenant is an agreement between two parties. Marriage is a covenant relationship. In his own blood Jesus has made a covenant with us. In the blood of Jesus, God dealt with the sin that separated us from our maker.

God made a covenant with his chosen people Israel declaring ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’ (Leviticus 26:12). Through Jeremiah he said he would make a new covenant with his people – *I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people* (Jeremiah 32:33). Paul saw this covenant as being fulfilled in the church (II Corinthians 6:16). It is not surprising therefore that when John saw the New Jerusalem that he heard a loud voice from heaven declaring the fulfilment of this age-old covenant. *God himself will be with them and be their God...and they shall be his people* (20:3). The word ‘people’ is plural for it is now Jew and Gentile; it is people from all nations, tribes and tongues.

The central feature of the new heaven and new earth is the holy city, the New Jerusalem. Attempts to understand just how the old will give way to the new, and what the new heaven and new earth will be like will be fruitless if we miss this central feature. And even more central is the presence of God in this holy city.

As the Lord promised in ages past, as we saw briefly in the coming of Jesus, so we will see fully, finally and forever when Jesus comes again – ‘I will dwell with them and they shall be my people and I will be their God’.

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