

Heaven, Part 1

Revelation 21 :3-4; 10-11; 21-26; 22:3-5

by Doug Sterrett

Have you ever stood up on Sorrento Heights, the mountain to our South and looked down into Big Valley, straining to see our church? Close to you trees, hills and forests are arrayed in exquisite detail, birds and even insects can be seen and heard clearly. But as you look intently into the distance the church cannot at first be distinguished through the drifting clouds and patchwork of fields and forests. Then, as you gaze intently you pick out the steeple and the shadowy outlines of a beautiful church begin to take shape. But, strain as you can, even through binoculars, you cannot quite make out the composition of the walls, the adornments on the building or the colorful flowers in the beds. Only the nearby sounds of the forest and community around you can be heard. The distant church seems silent. People at work or play are mostly invisible to your eye. The church remains distant, silent, and shadowy--an enticing blend of beautiful shapes and pleasing colors. Nevertheless, you know that there in the distance is your church, beautiful in all proportions and awesome to the eye awaits those who enter its doors. So it is with the Biblical teachings about Heaven. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NCV) "...Now we see as if we are looking into a dark mirror. But at that time, in the future, we shall see clearly. Now I know only a part. But at that time I will know fully, as God has known me. " In Paul's day a mirror was made of polished copper or bronze so it sometimes grew dark with tarnish and reflected images became as indistinct as Heaven seems to us today.

In Matthew 25:34 (NCV) Jesus promised that on judgment day, He will say to those who have followed Him, "Come. My Father has given you his blessing. Come and receive the kingdom God has prepared for you since the world was made. " What will that Kingdom be like? Will it be a place or a spiritual concept? Will it be a celestial city as some have supposed? Will it be off somewhere in distant space? Such questions pass through our mortal minds so, let's take a look as the Bible gives us glimpses of Heaven.

Early on we learn that Heaven will be a physical place of great beauty where we will enjoy a special relationship with God. I don't know how you picture Heaven in your mind, but I often think of it as a bright, holy city, built of jewels and paved with gold, shining with a divine radiance as it descends to earth. The Bible, and in particular Revelation, is full of symbolic descriptions, but it is also filled with physical descriptions. At some point we have to decide whether something is to be taken symbolically or literally. John's account of his vision in Revelation is a good example. He isn't telling us exactly what he saw because he has no words in his vocabulary to describe the view, so he has dipped into his huge basket of metaphors to describe some things as being "like a" and then he uses a jewel or something that gives the closest approximation to the word picture he is trying to paint. So, his descriptions of Heaven are a mixture of the literal and the symbolic. Listen to this description from Rev. 21 :3-4.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had disappeared. Now there was no sea. And I saw the holy city coming down out of heaven from God. This holy city is the new Jerusalem. It was prepared like a bride dressed for her husband.

Obviously, the "like a bride dressed for her husband" is a symbol pointing to a very intimate relationship with God. but the "holy city" seems to point to a literal place more beautiful than John can describe -- a place where we will live in extremely close relationship to God. Try to discern, then, between the physical and the symbolic as we search for evidence of a physical place in the midst of a description full of symbolic references. Listen to vv. 10-11.

The angel carried me away by the Spirit to a very large and high mountain. He showed me the holy city, Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God. It was shining with the glory of God. It was shining bright ~ a very expensive jewel, jasper. It was clear as crystal. The city had a great high wall with 12 gates.

The Symbolic? It shone bright like a very expensive jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. He is speaking of a divine light consisting of an array of colors and hues and of a quality unlike any in his experience. Think of yourself, living in ancient times, living in a cave and hunting and gathering your food. You are dressed in skins and have no written language, a vocabulary sufficient only for your crude life. Suddenly you are thrust into the 21st Century. When you return to your cave you try to explain what you have seen to your family--airplanes, cell phones, television, automobiles, even houses. Your language would have no words for these things. Your family would have no mental pictures remotely like what you have seen. They would be unable to picture the actual items and so you would have to describe them in terms of big grasshoppers, birds or horses. Symbols of reality, giving impressions of an awesome wonder but still falling far short of the reality of what you saw.

The Physical? Well it was a city, a new Jerusalem. It had a wall and 12 gates. These he could explain, perhaps inadequately, but nevertheless sufficiently to give his audience a mental picture of what he saw. So, John saw a physical city, somehow extending between and uniting both heaven and earth in a way we cannot presently grasp or describe. The city was so bright and the quality of light so pure and unique John had to use symbols like crystal for purity, bright and colorful like rare, multi-faceted, many hued jewels. In short it is a bright, physical place, beautiful, colorful, beyond description. He goes on in 21-26, "*And the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass And the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day—and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. "*

I recently dreamed that someone, I won't mention any names, had stashed away a lot of gold. The guy's wife said, "Honey, you may as well spend it. You can't take it with you." But, he was persistent. As he approached death he pleaded with God to let him take his gold with him to heaven. God finally allowed him to take whatever he could carry in a big black garbage bag. He carefully filled it with all it would hold and when he arrived before the gates of Heaven the angels guarding the gate looked into the bag and were really

puzzled. "Why, he's carrying a bag of pavement. Why would he want to bring pavement to Heaven?" The point, of course, is that what's important and beautiful to us in this life will lose its beauty and appear common in the splendor of Heaven.

We've all been in beautiful places. We live in a beautiful spot of rare quality now. And we suffer here as much, perhaps, as anyone on earth. We struggle daily to gain a sense of God's presence in our daily lives. He often seems very remote from us. It is for this very reason that the vision of Heaven suddenly begins to widen beyond the description of a physical place. John tells us in plain and literal words about another aspect of the heavenly environment. In Revelation 22:3-5 (NIV) he says "*no longer will there be any curse.*" [referring, of course, to the curse following the fall of Adam and Eve that caused us all to live in sin, separated from a full and perfect relationship with God.] He goes on. "*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city,*" [in other words God, who is perfect and just, will govern] "*and his servants will serve.*" [He's going to be with us, physically live with us, interrelate with us, govern us.] There is more: "*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light and they will reign forever and ever.*" Very literally, God will be the sole source of everything and we will be committed to Him as a new bride is committed to her husband. .

There will be a new heaven and a new earth—an entirely renewed creation—where we will all live in a close relationship with God. This Kingdom of God will extend across the present divide between Heaven and earth and the two will be united into one. Peter puts it this way in 2 Peter 3:13, "*...in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*" Righteousness here means being in a right relationship with God. This will be a new and special kind of unification of heaven and earth as the new city [Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God] descends down out of heaven (Rev. 21 :2). There will be a joining of heaven with earth, an entirely new creation where we will live [and this is the important part] in the literal presence of God.¹ It will be like returning to the Garden of Eden where God walked and talked with, Adam and Eve, before the fall.

We will be restored to a full and right relationship with God! This too, will be a recreated relationship only remotely resembling what we know now. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines Heaven as "the place where God most fully makes known his presence to bless."² Jesus promised in John 14:2 "*I go to prepare a place for you.*" Yes, it will be a physical place, a wonderful place where we will enjoy the fullness of God in a special joining of heaven and earth, an entirely new union and creation we can only partly understand in our present state.

What is Heaven like? Two monks once discussed the life to come. One insisted that it would be *taliter*--Latin for "like" this life; the other that it would be *aliter*-- "unlike" it. They agreed that whichever of the two died first should communicate with the brother left on earth. Finally one died. Later, he told his brother in a dream: *Nec taliter, nec aliter, sed totaliter aliter!* -- "Not as you thought, nor as I thought, but altogether different."³ There will indeed be surprises for us in the life to come, but our ignorance as to the minutiae of the life is no excuse for shutting our eyes to what God has revealed. Stay tuned for more on the new Heaven and the new earth.

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¹ Wayne Grudem, "The New Heavens and New Earth", Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994, p. 1158.

² Ibid., 1159

³ Clarence Edward Macartney, Macartney's Illustrations, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, MCMXLV (1955), p. 162