

WHEN JESUS APPEARS THE WORLD WILL BE MADE NEW Isaiah 65:17-25 & Revelation 21:1-8

INTRODUCTION

I've always been impressed with the stories of people who left behind the familiar: their friends, their families, a well known way of life in order to come to America merely on the basis of a promise that life would be better here. I recently read "The Worst Hard Time" which is an account of those who survived the Great American Dust Bowl out on the western edges of Oklahoma and Texas. This inhospitable land was settled mostly by people who had homes and lives in the eastern U.S. but who were lured to this wind swept land by the promise of owning their own land. However, there were also over 300,000 German speaking Russians lured by the same promise. The American railroad companies sent agents to the Volga River region of Russia to recruit the minority German speaking Russians to abandon their farms and homes and to travel half way around the world to start a new life on the western plains of the U.S. While those coming from the eastern U.S. had to travel long distances on coal-fired trains and by horse drawn wagon, those coming from Russia had to endure all manner of hardship, not the least of which was a month or more journey across the Atlantic Ocean. All these people endured such hardship and gladly left behind all that was familiar because of the promise of a better life, a better land.

We are told in Hebrews 11 that Abraham left his home country and his relatives and went to a land that God promised that he would receive as an inheritance. We are told that he left all that was familiar and went to live in the land of Canaan as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob because he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose founder and builder is God. His obedience was motivated by a desire to gain life in the new city of God. A few verses later the author to the Hebrews says this about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and his wives and children: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." Abraham and his family left home and lived as nomads in the land of Canaan because they believed that the new heavens and the new earth, the New Jerusalem was a better place to live than their homes in Ur and Haran. They viewed Canaan, not as ultimate Promised Land but as a symbol of that final new world.

The author to the Hebrews uses the example of these Jewish patriarchs to encourage us to acknowledge, like them, that we are strangers and exiles on this earth. This is not our home. Rather, we, like them are seeking a homeland, a better country, that is, a heavenly one. We are a pilgrim people, a people on the move, passing through this country into a better country. Now, just as the agents for the railroads had to describe the benefits of living in western Oklahoma to persuade the Russians to undertake such an arduous journey, so we need to be regularly reminded of the benefits we will receive in that heavenly country to which we are going so that we will leave everything behind and not be seduced into stopping along the way and making a home here.

So during this Christmas season I have sought to remind us of what will be true when Jesus comes back the second time so that we will seek after that city that has foundations whose founder and builder is God. We've seen that when he appears there will be no more death, no more sin, no more injustice or wickedness but only joy for all God's people. This morning we are going to see that all things are made new when Jesus appears. We are, by looking at the first 8 verses of Revelation 21 going to see something of the glory of that new creation that will come into existence when Jesus returns. The reason we are doing this is so that we will remain faithful to Jesus for a lifetime and live our lives here as if we were but traveling through. My aim is to enable us to be so delighted with the end of our journey that we will make all haste in getting there and will not be turned aside from our journey.

As Jonathon Edwards, the great American pastor and theologian said in a sermon, "...all other concerns of life ought to be entirely subordinated to this. As when a man is on a journey, all the steps that he takes are in order to further him in his journey and subordinated to that aim of getting to his journey's end; and if he carries money or provision with him, 'tis to supply him in his journey. Journeying towards heaven ought to be our only work and business, so that all that we have and do should be in order to that. When we have worldly enjoyments, we should be ready to part with them whenever they are in the way of our going towards heaven; we should sell all this world for heaven... When we use our worldly enjoyments and possessions, it should be with such [a] view and in such a manner as to further us in our way heavenward: thus we should eat, and drink, and clothe ourselves..." So this morning I aim to help us to leave this country behind in order that we might go to that new land which will come into existence when Jesus comes again.

MAIN POINT

Christians are people who seek a better country because...

I. All things will be new (vv. 1-2 & 4-5)

If you compare Isaiah 65:17-25 with the first five verses of Revelation 21 you will notice a remarkable similarity. Quite clearly what the Lord said through Isaiah about creating a new heavens and a new earth, John sees being fulfilled in his vision. The whole creation is made new, as the Lord declares in v. 4. There has been a debate through the last 2000 years of church history as to whether or not the new heavens and the new earth are this universe cleansed of sin and the defilement of sin or if God is going to destroy this universe and make an entirely new universe. I'm not sure it matters a great deal. Personally, the weight of evidence appears to me to fall in favor of this universe being cleansed rather than it being destroyed. I think v. 4 points in that direction: all that currently exists will be made new so that there is a continuity between the world to come and this world just as there is continuity between these bodies and our resurrection bodies. Whatever the case may be the fact is that when Jesus returns and completes his work our final destination is going to be to live in new physical bodies in a new physical universe.

You can especially see the physical nature of the new creation in the language of Isaiah 65. We will build houses and plant vineyards. The work of our hands shall not be in vain. We shall long enjoy the work of our hands. One of the noteworthy features of Isaiah 65 is that God is using language from the Law of Moses. In both Leviticus and Deuteronomy the Lord tells Israel that if they obey his commands then they will plant vineyards and build houses and enjoy the fruit of their labor. The Lord will remove harmful beasts and they will live securely in their own land. So life in the new heavens and the new earth is described in the language of God's promised blessings to the obedient. This use of the Law of Moses points to the person and work of Christ. All the people to whom these promises are made are lawbreakers. Thus, if the blessings of the new heavens and the new earth belong only to the obedient and we are not obedient, that must mean that God counts the obedience of Jesus in our place.

There is another thing to note in both Revelation and Isaiah. In Isaiah, immediately after declaring that he is going to make a new heavens and a new earth God says that which he creates is Jerusalem. His creating of Jerusalem is a cause for joy and it is an expression of God's joy in his people. He talks about Jerusalem as if it is his people. The point seems to be that the new universe he creates is also a New Jerusalem and that this new place is inhabited fully by his people. This exact pattern is followed in Revelation. After John sees the new heavens and the new earth he then sees a New Jerusalem coming down from heaven dressed as a bride for her husband. So again, the new universe and the New Jerusalem appear to be identical. Also, we know from Revelation 19:7-8 that the church, the collection of all the saints is the bride of Jesus and thus the New Jerusalem is also equated with the whole people of God, just as in Isaiah. There are an enormous amount of implications from this language regarding how the Bible ties together and especially how we are to read our OT's. However, the main point to see here is that the new universe is the new city of God and is inhabited by the uncountable people of God.

Finally, notice the other mark of newness that we find in both Isaiah and Revelation. In Isaiah the Lord says, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress." In Revelation, John says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '...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.” I want you to think for a moment about the things that have caused you pain or sadness in the last week. Some in here have cried tears of sorrow in the last week. If you haven’t had any sadness or pain in the last week, just think about the last month. Whatever those things are that have caused you sorrow or hurt or physical or emotional pain will be no more. Everything that causes grief, including death will be gone. All that is in this world that is the cause of sorrow and pain and grief will have ceased to exist. We will live in a new universe that has been cleansed of all that makes life in this world dreadful.

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- *And because...*

II. We will live with God (vv. 2b-3)

There are two metaphors used in these verses to describe the relationship of God to his people. First in v. 2 we will live with God as a bride with her husband. Again, I know that it is Jerusalem that is the bride and this same fact is repeated in vv. 9 and following. However, the OT regularly uses Jerusalem to stand for the people who live there and so it is here. This is a very common OT and NT metaphor for God’s relation to his people. In fact, in Isaiah 62 the Lord is addressing Jerusalem and promising her a glorious future. In the course of these promises he says to Jerusalem: “...and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” So the return of Christ is viewed as our wedding day and then our life with God in the new heavens and the new earth is like a marriage. This is the best of marriages where there is a mutual esteem and affection shared between us and the Lord throughout all of eternity. The second metaphor is in v. 7. Our relationship with God is like that of a Father with his son. So life in the new heavens and the new earth will be like living with your family only without all the sinfulness that makes family life so troublesome here. We will truly be at home when Christ comes again.

But the main way that our relationship with God is described in these verses is in v. 3. The word that is translated “dwelling place” is literally “tabernacle” and the verb translated “dwell” is literally “tabernacle with”. In Leviticus 26:11-12 the Lord says at the end of describing the blessings Israel will experience if they obey him, “I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” Then the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel in describing the end of all things says, “I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place (tabernacle) shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”

The reason that God had Israel make a tabernacle and the reason that the temple was made by Solomon was because the new heavens and the new earth are God’s dwelling place where we will live with him. The difference is that in that day there will be no separation between the Lord and us as there was in the tabernacle and in the temple between the Lord and the people. In fact, in the rest of chapter 21 the new creation is described as a city made in the form of the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary where God said he would dwell among the Israelites and where only the high priest could go once a year. So the whole creation becomes the inner sanctuary where God lives and we live with him because Christ is our high priest and has entered the Holy of Holies on our behalf. But also this language points us back to the Garden of Eden where God walked with Adam and Eve each day. There was no separation between the Lord and his people there just as there will be no separation between us and the Lord in the new heavens and the new earth.

There is a member of our congregation whose family owns season tickets to the Green Bay Packers. These tickets are on the fifty yard line and only about 5 rows back from the sideline. When he goes to the games he is sitting within spittin’ distance of the Packers right on the sideline. The seats in front of his family’s seats are owned by the team and so each time he goes family members of some of the Packer players are sitting right in front of him. Obviously one of the highlights of going to the games is the close proximity to the players and

their families that he enjoys. However, he doesn't know these people and they do not recognize him. While near these famous and admired people, he is still an outsider. When we go to live in the new heavens and the new earth we will not only be near the most important person in the universe but we will be related to him as a wife to her husband and as a son with his father. We will be his people and he will be our God. He will walk among us in the person of Jesus. We will no longer be outsiders but invited into the very center of all reality as we live with the great Triune God forever in the new creation which is his tabernacle.

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III. We will be fully satisfied (vv. 6-7)

In v. 6 God himself announces that he will quench the thirst of all those who are thirsty "from the spring of the water of life without payment." Here we have one of the most common metaphors of salvation used in the Bible. In the OT the people of God are described as those who thirst after God. Psalm 42:1-2, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" Psalm 63:1, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." In the NT Jesus describes us as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Then repeatedly we are promised that God will satisfy our thirst and our hunger. In Isaiah 55:1 the Lord invites all the hungry and thirsty who have no money to come to him and to buy food and drink without money. In Jeremiah 2:13 God describes himself as a fountain of living waters. In Isaiah 44 the Lord describes how he is going to pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. Repeatedly he talks about how he is going to send water to turn the desert into a garden as in Psalm 107:35, "He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water." All this imagery is rooted in what he did for Israel after he brought them out of Egypt. Remember how they were wandering in the desert and ran out of water and how the Lord, through Moses, brought water out of the rock to quench their thirst? So this imagery communicates this fact: in the new heavens and the new earth we will be completely content and satisfied. We will have no unmet desires. There will be no lack, no scarcity, no want. We will know the contentment and security of being at home with God with all of our needs supplied.

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IV. We will be separated from sin and safe from God's wrath (v. 8)

At the end of chapter 20, just prior to this passage we were told about God's judgment on the wicked. Everyone whose names were not written in the Lamb's book of life were cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. Then four times in chapters 21 and 22, which are a description of the new creation where God's people will live with God, John is reminded that all sinners, all who are unclean are outside the city, outside the new creation and undergoing eternal punishment. First here in v. 8, "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." Then, Revelation 21:27, "But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." And Revelation 22:3, "No longer will there be anything accursed..." Finally, Revelation 22:15, "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

What is the point of these repeated reminders of the eternal punishment that is going on outside the new creation? There are at least four things that these reminders are intended to do for us. First, we are reminded that there will be no more sin in the new heavens and the new earth. It will not be because we are not sinners. Rather, this language reminds us that we have been cleansed, we have been washed from our uncleanness by the

blood of Christ. The new creation will be a place free from sin because of what Jesus has done for us. We will no longer want to sin. We will only want to love God and our neighbor as ourselves and we will have the ability to perfectly act upon those desires. Remaining sin will be done away with and we will be truly free because the Son of God will have set us free from sin. We will only use our bodies to perform righteousness because of our union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

Second, we will know throughout all of eternity of the judgment of the wicked and we will rejoice in that judgment as it will be the revelation of the holiness and justice of God. Throughout all of eternity we will delight in the justice of God which is revealed in the punishment of the unbelieving. It is in the new heavens and the new earth where we will be able to rightly pray the innumerable imprecatory psalms as for example: Psalm 140:9-13, “As for the head of those who surround me, let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be cast into fire, into miry pits, no more to rise! Let not the slanderer be established in the land; let evil hunt down the violent man speedily! I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will execute justice for the needy. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall dwell in your presence.” In that day we will give thanks to God’s name for his just punishment upon the wicked. Now we pray for our enemies that God would have mercy upon them but there is a day coming when we will rejoice in the punishment of the wicked as it reveals the glory of God’s justice.

Third, throughout all of eternity our knowledge of the punishment of the wicked will increase our joy in God and our gratitude to him because we will always know that we ought to be in that lake of fire and that the only reason we are not there is due to the love of God, the death of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. We will rejoice that our lives were redeemed from the pit. The Lamb who was slain who stands in the center of the throne will be the object of our praise and thanks because he has rescued us from the wrath of God.

Fourth, the knowledge that the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, etc. are in the lake of fire is meant to spur us into faithful living in Christ. You will notice that in v. 7 it is “those who conquer” who will gain this inheritance. “Those who conquer” are those who trust in Jesus until the end of their lives. We must persevere in faith to the end of our lives if we are going to escape the lake of fire and live with God in the new heavens and the new earth. Thus, when we hear that the cowardly, those who abandon Christ out of fear of persecution are in the lake of fire, we will not turn from Christ but hold fast to him no matter the cost. When we hear that the sexually immoral are in the lake of fire we will fight against our addiction to pornography and fight for purity by faith in Christ so that we will not end up there. When we hear that liars are in the lake of fire we will fight to tell the truth even though it brings the displeasure of men upon us because we prefer to please Christ, not men. The knowledge that all that is unclean is outside this glorious city motivates us to live by faith in Christ so that we might join him in that city when he comes again.

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