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Revelation 21:1-4

What We Believe: Heaven

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When you think of heaven, what do you think about? Our popular conceptions of heaven are usually a bit weird, and a bit boring, and are more influenced by film, television, and culture than the Bible.

Did you ever watch the 1969 movie **The Littlest Angel**? An eight-year old shepherd boy from Biblical times dies and goes to heaven, only to discover, heaven is really **boring** and **serious**. Everyone wears robes, which are a light shade of pink, and spend their time flying around in pink clouds and singing. In the movie, the angels are really men dressed in short robes, wearing wings, jumping around on trampolines. It's creepy.

I saw a **newscast** a couple years ago where one host asked someone whose child had died recently if they felt better knowing their child was now an angel in heaven with wings. That's not how it works.

More recently, there's a show on television called **The Good Place**, starring Kristen Bell (famous for Veronica Mars and Frozen). She dies and goes to heaven only to discover there's been a mistake and she's not supposed to be there. Heaven is a tiny neighborhood reserved for only the best of people who aren't just good, but great. Lots of people believe you just have to do more good than bad to get into heaven.

Last week we started our final **Article of Faith**, which explains what happens when we die.

The Last Things (15): We believe in the personal and undeniable return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth and the fulfillment of His kingdom. We believe in the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal punishment of the wicked, and the eternal peace and joy of the righteous.

Last week we learned hell is a real place, where we don't want anyone to go, and that anyone who repents of their sins and puts their faith and trust in Jesus Christ goes to be with Jesus in heaven. This week I want to explain where believers end up **after** the **final judgment**. Let's pick up where we left off.

Christians will inhabit the new heaven and new earth with God.

This week I re-read a book called Eternity Changes Everything by Stephen Witmer, as well as listened to a new one, Heaven: Biblical Answers to Common Questions by Randy Alcorn. I like how Stephen, a pastor in Pepperell MA and a friend, explains the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21, so I've adapted his material here. *Our **current earth** (not some different planet) will **transform** into the new heaven and new earth through a removal, a renovation, and a return (3Rs).*

1. Removal

Today's passage, Revelation 21:1-4, comes right after the **great white throne judgment**. At that judgment, it says, "the earth and heavens **fled** from his presence, and there was no place for them." (Rev 20:11b). So the final judgment takes place outside of this universe in a kind of **limbo, elsewhere, or no-space**. Once the judgment is complete, and God banishes Hades, death, and those who reject Jesus to hell, we leave that limbo and return to something even better than what we had before.

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ... '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." **Revelation 21:1, 4** (cf. Isaiah 65:17, 19)

So what is happening? God is finally joining heaven and earth together, and the first thing he does is completely remove death, hades, hell, and the wicked from this brand new universe. In heaven, we **won't watch the wicked burn forever** because they'll be gone. **Death** is gone too. *You'll never have to be separated from Jesus or your family in Christ again.*

That's what "there was no longer any **sea**" means. Throughout the Bible, and in the ancient world, the **sea** is a place of judgment, of **chaos**, of death, of separation (Rev 13:1). There will be **beaches**, and oceans, and snorkeling in heaven, but none of it will keep us from each other. More **personally** it says, there won't be any **tears** in heaven. Does this mean we won't be able to cry tears of happiness, or express ourselves? No, it means no more **mourning**, sadness, weeping, heartache, **depression**, anxiety, fear.

Monica and I live in **Chelmsford**. Everyday for about two years I've driven past an **abandoned piece of property**. I don't know why the owner left, but he left behind a trailer, a garage, and a shed on 2-3 acres of property. Over the last two years it has become more and more rundown, weeds growing up, the door to the garage left open. Finally, a couple weeks ago, a **backhoe** magically appeared, and tore down the buildings. And I wanted to cheer every-time I drove by, partly because I'm a privileged suburbanite, but mostly because the whole neighborhood looks so much better. Our street feels brand new.

Jesus will take a **backhoe** to this world—to every cemetery, every meth lab, every greedy corporation, every manmade wall, every abortion clinic, every monument of racism, every abusive relationship, every mental illness, every funeral, every terrorist group, every injustice, to every [.....]—you fill in the blank. **What** do you need Jesus to **remove** from your life? An unchangeable sin you committed in the past? A mistake you made and can't take back? *In the new heavens and new earth there's going to be a removal, as well as a...*

2. Renovation

The idea that God is going to destroy this world, planet earth, and create a brand new one, is wrong. He's going to create a new one, but it's a renovation of the old one. Paul writes this in Romans.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. **Romans 8:20-21**

Did you hear the most important word? **Liberation!** God is going to liberate this world from sin. The trees, the mountains, the rivers, the animals, God is going to restore them to their original design, and somehow, they'll be even better because of what they've been through.

There's a **Mountain Pine Beetle infestation in Colorado** right now. "One of 14 trees are dead in Colorado forests" and beetles have "killed trees across 3.4 million acres." There's a lot of downsides to all that beetle-kill (increased wildfires, more pollution), but there's also beauty. Beetle-kill makes **beautiful furniture** (rocking chairs, tables, cabinets, etc.). *God is going to take all this death we see around us, all this pain and hurt, even from our own lives, and he's going to renovate it into eternal beauty.*

And this applies to **you!** *You're going to be renovated.* That's the **resurrection!**

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. **Philippians 3:20-21**

Jesus will transform our current bodies into the best version of ourselves. That's right! You will all be able to do as much **CrossFit** as you want and never get sore! You won't have to worry about **over-eating**, or under-eating, because you'll always eat the right amount of the best food. You'll be able to hold the hand of that **Christian grandparent** or **parent** whose hand **once shook** and it won't shake anymore. Why? Because our current bodies will be like **Jesus' resurrected body**. He had a glorified resurrected body that "could walk through walls"¹ and ascended into heaven (John 20:26, Acts 1:9). We'll have glorified bodies like his.

In seminary, I took a **class on Revelation**, and one of the students asked, "What will happen in heaven to people who have lost limbs or are disfigured?" Maybe you're asking, "What will happen to my special needs child?" My **professor** shared how he used to volunteer with kids with **deformities** and **disabilities**. One little boy who was born with no legs. He had a "flipper" for legs. My professor volunteered with another man the kids called **uncle** (I've changed his name to Jerry). Uncle Jerry told the kids heaven **streets** are made of **gold**. The little boy asked, "Will I have new legs there?" Uncle Jerry said, "Yes. You'll have new legs." The little boy said, "Uncle Jerry, when we get to heaven, will you run down them with me?" This is what heaven is like. This little boy will run down heaven's golden streets with Uncle Jerry and Jesus too. Do you want to run with him? Do you want to run with Jesus? *The new heavens and new earth are a removal and a renovation.*

3. Return

Remember back to the **garden of Eden** before the fall? It was a perfect place full of life and vitality.

The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; **Genesis 2:9-10a**

When Adam and Eve sinned, God **cursed** them, and **banished** them from the garden (Gen 3). Outside they no longer had access to the **tree of life** or the water flowing from the garden. They lost access to **eternal life**. Now let's jump forward to the return the new heaven and new earth and the garden.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. **Revelation 22:1-3a**

The garden is back and the curse is banished! **Paradise was lost**, but now **paradise is found**. **Imagine** walking through a garden full of **new plants** you've never seen before. There are golden **daffodils** and **violet irises** and a **brand new flower** a **brand new shade of blue**. Did you know OSU scientists accidentally discovered a new shade of blue? It's called "**YInMn blue**." They found it by mixing chemicals that somehow completely absorb red and green wavelengths, and only reflects back true blue. Imagine a living garden full YInMn blue flowers, and this is just the first day of eternity here. *The new heavens and new earth will be a removal, a renovation, and a return.*

How does this apply to us now? Because God is refurbishing and renewing this planet and universe, it means the things we do in this world now have **eternal significance**. So we should not **trash** the planet because God will make a new one. Instead, we should care for **creation** because when we do, in some mysterious way, we help usher in God's **future redemptive work**. When the youth go to the **Spicket River Cleanup**, pulling tires and garbage out of the river, they're doing something of eternal value. When we recycle, pick-up trash, or limit pollution, that's valuable and good. *We're a part of the removal, renovation, and return.*

¹ Witmer, Stephen E. Eternity changes everything: how to live now in the light of your future. United Kingdom: The Good Book Company, 2014. Page 20.

Eternity sounds pretty good so far, but just having a brand new creation to live in forever isn't good enough. What ruined the **McCallister family's Christmas** trip to Paris? Think of the movie Home Alone? They left Kevin McCallister behind! They have to spend the rest of the movie trying to figure out how to get back to Kevin. *Whose presence makes heaven heaven? ... God's!*

The best part of eternity is God's presence.

I bet some of you thought I was **going to say Jesus**. I am saying Jesus, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit too. The triune God in his fullness will be with us in the new heavens and new earth.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **Revelation 21:2-3**

The word "dwelling place" is the same Greek word used for the "**tabernacle**." In the Old Testament, the tabernacle was the place where God dwelt with his people. He dwelt specifically in the **most holy place**, which was at the back of the tent **separated by a curtain**, and was 15 feet high, wide, and deep—the shape of a **cube**. When Solomon builds the temple, we see the most holy place built as another cube.

The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty wide and twenty high. He overlaid the inside with pure gold, and he also overlaid the altar of cedar. **1 Kings 6:20**

One more time we find this golden cube, but this time in the new heavens and new earth. Remember the **New Jerusalem city** that came down from heaven? Here's its **measurements**.

The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long ... The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. **Revelation 21:16, 18**

The most holy place within the **tabernacle** and **temple**, the **cube** where God resides, has come down to earth in the form of a **golden city** that's also in the shape of a cube. Revelation is using **rich symbolic imagery** to convey truth. *Heaven is more beautiful than you can imagine because God will dwell there with us.*

Stephen Witmer in his book talks about how he loved to go see his **grandparents**, not just for all the fun things they got to do at their house, but most of all to see them.² We all have stories like that, don't we? I loved playing on Pole Hill in Estes Park (the town I grew up in). On this mountain outside of town there was a Bible school, so there was a rope swing, and a chalet to run around, and a gym. But what made Pole Hill really great was hanging out with my friend **Joseph** and his family. It was because I was **with Joseph** that I loved being there. We're going to love eternity so much because we'll be **with Jesus, with the Father, and with the Holy Spirit**.³ It's all about that word, **with**.⁴ But it's not just God that we'll love being **with**.

You'll share eternity with your whole church family.

² Witmer, page 25.

³ Jethani, Skye. *What's Wrong with Religion?: 9 Things No One Told You about Faith* (chapter 6). Niddy Griddy Design, Inc. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Learn more about "with" in *What's Wrong with Religion?* by Skye Jethani.

Remember when I preached on the difference between the local church and the universal church a couple weeks back? For now Jesus calls us to **pour our love** into a **local church**, a specific congregation in a time and location. But in eternity we're called to pour our love into the **universal church**, all people from all times and places who know and trust Jesus. The **new Jerusalem**, the cubed city that represents God's holy presence, is also called a **bride**. This is a **mixed metaphor** because the **bride of Christ** is also a name for the **church** (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7). In eternity, the church will be perfect, spotless, and ready for spending forever with Jesus. If you're a **Christian, you're the bride**, and you will get to spend eternity with every other believer from all times and places who are also the bride of Christ.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. **Revelation 7:9a**

Do you ever feel like you **never get enough time** with your loved ones, your husband or wife, your kids, your friends? Do you ever feel there's not enough **fellowship time** during **church** or **small group**? You will have all eternity to get to know and love a countless multitude of your **spiritual family members**. Randy Alcorn says we'll start in heaven with all the relationships in Christ we formed in this life. Then...

From there we will work outward, developing new friendships without ever losing the old ones. Heaven is where our ultimate family and best friends will be — including many we don't know yet. ... In fact, you may not yet have met the best friend you'll ever have!⁵

You will have a **billion-trillion years** to become best friends with every single person there, starting with Jesus himself. A million years from now, you will have formed **deep friendships** with Christians from other centuries and countries, from **Mongolia, Africa, the Middle East**. Together we'll tell each other stories of the life we lived and how Jesus was so good to us. Maybe some of you are sad that you won't be married to your **husband or wife** anymore. You'll be married to a **better spouse, Jesus**. Have hope. If your spouse is a believer, this life is like getting a head start on a friendship that will last for all eternity.

Come share eternity with God and with your whole church family.

Last week I closed by **asking**, "Does hell break your heart?" This week I'm asking, "**Does heaven fill your heart?**" Does it fill your heart with joy, and hope, and love, and happiness (Heb 11:16)? *God wants to fill you with such longing for that place that it helps you endure in difficult times here, care for his creation here (because he's going to renovate it), and share this future homeland with others here.*

Do you want your friends, family, and neighbors to share in this eternity? I do. **Think back** to those **people's names** you might have thought of last week as I talked about hell, the ones who need Jesus. *We don't just want them to escape hell. We want them to find heaven.* Next Saturday is **bring-a-friend day** at Cornerstone. Let's invite those around us with the end goal in mind, **sharing** the new heaven and new earth **with** them. *Come share eternity with God and with your whole church family.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).

⁵ Alcorn, Randy. *Heaven: Biblical Answers to Common Questions* (Kindle Locations 379-383). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.