

## Series Revelation

### Scripture #32 Revelation 21:1-8

Today and the next two Sundays we will focus on the characteristics of eternity. I find that, as I get older, I give more and more thought to my heavenly dwelling place. The Apostle Paul expressed the thoughts of believers when he wrote, “We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ... For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” Paul summed up his thoughts by writing, “We would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (*II Corinthians 5:1-8*).

The descriptions of our heavenly home are not given in Scripture in detail. The information in Revelation 21 and 22 is limited but tantalizing. There is not enough information to satisfy our curiosity, but there is enough information to make us eager to be members of God’s kingdom and to avoid the tragic outcome of those who refuse God’s salvation. Scripture does not explain in detail either creation or eternity. It does not explain in detail either our election and justification nor our future glorification. The emphasis of Scripture is on the here and now; on sanctification — on how we are to live as members of God’s kingdom on earth in this present age. God assumes that if we trust Him during our earthly lives, we will be willing to trust Him for eternity.

In Revelation 21 and 22 there are no graphic pictures of the activities of evil forces. There are no more mind-boggling pictures of demons from the Abyss or plagues of judgment or tribulations of saints. Instead, in our remaining messages, we will be able to concentrate our thoughts on the incomprehensible beauties and blessings of life in the presence of God.

The previous message ended with a vision of the glorious appearing of Jesus at the end of the age, in which He judged the dead, rewarded the saints, and destroyed those who had been destroying the earth. Babylon was gone, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, and Satan were in the lake of fire, all those individuals whose names were not found in the book of life were also in the lake of fire, and all those whose names were in the book of life remained with the Lord. The victory of Jesus over His enemies was therefore complete.

The verses we will think about today are directly connected to that previous passage (*chapter 20*). It is unfortunate that the chapter divisions in the Bible often break up the units of thought, because the verses we are focusing on today are actually the last scene of the sixth “sweep.” Revelation 21, verses 1 through 8, is a brief description of the final accomplishment of Jesus upon His return to earth.

### **Read Revelation 21:1-8**

The key word in this chapter is “newness.” In his vision John saw a new heaven and a new earth, and the new Jerusalem which was descending to earth. “The old order of things had passed away,” and, from His throne, God declared, “I am making everything new.”

This vision draws our attention to three important themes. First, there is the end of the old age, which includes our present age (verse 1). This old order was contaminated with sin, and it must be destroyed before the new order can be inaugurated (*I Corinthians 7:31; II Pet 3:10-13*). Second, there is the continuation of the bridal theme from chapter 19. In that passage, the bride is pictured as ready for the wedding, and the guests are invited to the banquet of the Lamb. Here the bride is pictured as a city, “beautifully dressed for her husband.” The metaphors in this book get mixed up in interesting ways, don’t they?

Third, there is the uniting of heaven and earth. The dwelling of God comes down from heaven and begins His residence with His people. This, of course, has been the objective of God’s redemptive efforts ever since the disobedience of Adam and Eve. With the completion of these three happenings, the work of God in human history will be completed. That’s why the One who is seated on the throne will be able to say, “It is done.”

The final judgment of the old heaven and earth was mentioned in chapter 20. We learned that “earth and sky fled from God’s presence and there was no place for them” (*Revelation 20:11*). It was only after the consignment of the wicked dead into the lake of fire that the old creation could be destroyed and the new heaven and a new earth appeared.

Most modern day commentators think that the present world will be totally destroyed and that God will bring a brand new heaven and earth into existence. The Apostle Peter, in his second letter, assumed this view. He wrote, “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (*II Peter 3:13*).

The promise of a new heaven and new earth was first made by God to Isaiah. God said, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more” (*Isaiah 65:17-19*). According to some commentators, those verses by Isaiah are the background to the vision given to John.

Let me talk about heaven for a few minutes. To the Israelites in the Old Testament, “heaven” could refer to the sky over the earth — that is, the place of clouds and the source of rain. The Israelites also used the term “heaven” to refer to the celestial expanse where, it was assumed, God and other heavenly beings dwelled, where God’s throne was located, and from where He both judged and acted on behalf of His people.

In Jesus’ teaching, “heaven” is the place where His faithful followers will be rewarded (*Matthew 5:12*) and will have their home (*John 14:2-3*). The Apostle Paul wrote that heaven is the place where believers have citizenship (*Philippians 3:20*), where we have “an eternal house not built by human hands” (*II Corinthians 5:1*). We are informed that Jesus was taken up into heaven (*Acts 1:11*), and that he is presently in heaven “at the right hand of God” (*Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12-13*).

This information is helpful and encouraging, but there is much we do not know. For example, the verses I just referred to imply that heaven is a specific location, but should we think of the heavenly “heaven” as an actual physical location? After all, God is spirit and is, therefore, not limited by physical characteristics. We think of heaven as “up there,” but is this assumption to be taken literally? The point is that Scripture gives us a very sketchy description of God’s dwelling place.

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5, John saw the throne of God in heaven, and God the Father and the Lamb surrounded by many celestial beings. In other visions, John saw the multitude of victorious saints worshiping before the throne (*Revelation 6:9-11; 7:9-17*).

I mention all this to illustrate that, in this present age, there is a distinction, a clear-cut separation, between heaven and earth. There has to be this separation because God cannot be part of anything evil and contaminated with sin. However, in the eternal order, heaven and earth will be united. Notice that John described the new Jerusalem as coming down out of heaven. As incredible as it may seem, the eternal home of God's redeemed people will be here on a re-created earth.

God originally created humanity to dwell on the earth, and his plan is for a new earth to be their place for eternity. God also originally intended to have a close personal relationship with His human creation, and His plan is to once again be in close personal proximity with His people. The loud voice from the throne announced, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

This statement, "They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God," was a divine promise often made in the Old Testament. It was originally spoken to Abraham when God promised him many descendants. It was repeated to the Israelites when God gave instructions for the building of the tabernacle (*Exodus 29:45*), when God announced the future New Covenant to the prophet Jeremiah (*Jeremiah 31:33*), when He predicted the return of the exiles from Babylon (*Jeremiah 32:38*) and at other significant times when Israel needed encouragement. At the present time, God dwells with those who comprise His Church (*II Corinthians 6:16*). That divine indwelling, which at present is through the Holy Spirit, will be perfected in an even more marvelous way in the new heaven and earth.

Verse 4 describes some of the benefits belonging to the saints. Generally speaking, there will be no causes of sorrow. Death, mourning, crying, and pain — these have been associated with human life since the time of Adam and Eve. They are the consequences of disobedience and spiritual separation from God. They are identified with the old order of things. Praise the Lord, "These former things will be gone" forever. These benefits sum up the promises given by Jesus to the overcomers in the seven letters at the beginning of this book.

In verse 5 there is a voice which emanates from the throne, which is at this point in the midst of the saints on earth. This great throne was first described by John in chapters 4 and 5, and most recently it was the place of final judgment (*Revelation 20:11*). Verse 6 indicates that it is God the Father Almighty who is speaking. He is the One identified in chapter 1 as the Alpha and Omega. He further identifies Himself as “the Beginning and the End.” [*These terms are applied by Jesus to Himself in chapter 22.*]

These titles occur at the beginning and the end this book, at the beginning and the end of the visions given to John, thus signifying that God was sovereign at the beginning of creation and that He will continue to be in charge at the end as well. He was the Originator of space and time and He will also be the One to terminate human history.

God urges John to write everything down, not only this specific vision but all the visions in the book. This is a repeat of the command given in the first chapter. God affirms that the words about “newness” are “trustworthy and true.” John must take to heart what he has heard, and write it down for the comfort and encouragement of others.

It is quite fascinating that the statement in the beginning of verse 6 is plural, literally, “They are done.” In chapter 16, the voice from the throne said, “It is over,” referring to a series of specific events ending the present evil order. However, here God says, “They are over,” meaning that all the events of world history, including the banishment of Satan and evildoers to the lake of fire, the creation of new heaven and new earth, and the inauguration of the final eternal new age, are brought to completion. Hallelujah.

The last words of this vision declare again the two possible final destinies of people. For the followers of Jesus, they will have the opportunity to drink “without cost from the spring of the water of life.” This will be their privilege for eternity. The prophet Isaiah reported these words of the LORD, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat!” (*Isaiah 55:1*). In the New Testament, Jesus declared, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me; let him drink, whoever believes in me” (*John 7:37*). On another occasion, Jesus said, “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life” (*John 4:14*).

This passage concludes with a challenge to the readers to recognize the difference between those who are faithful and those who are not, or, to put it in context, to decide if they will be a “conqueror” (verse 7) or a “coward” (verse 8). The statement, “the one who overcomes,” was spoken by Jesus at the conclusion of each of the letters to the seven church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3. Note that “the overcomers” will “inherit” everything that God offers. This is the only place in this book in which the concept of inheritance is used, and it refers to the rewards awaiting those who are faithful. Heavenly rewards are good. However the most incredible fact is that “God will be close to each faithful believer, and they will be His children.”

In contrast to those who will inherit the blessings, sinners will be cast into the lake of fire, the second death. I won't take the time to talk about the specific characteristics of these people which are listed here, but the list is a reflection of sins mentioned elsewhere in the book.

The first term on the list, “coward,” probably describes those who had an interest in Jesus but who failed to persevere. They gave in to the pressures of the world and were not overcomers. They were not faithful to Jesus. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote about these kind of people. “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire” (*Hebrew 10:26; also see II Peter 2:20-21*).

This list is given here as a strong exhortation to the readers of the letter to maintain steadfast loyalty to Jesus. The question we must ask ourselves is: will we be “overcomers” or “cowards?” Clearly, the answer should be, “Let us stay faithful to Jesus to the end.”