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The New Jerusalem Is No Heaven

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When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.
When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory.[1]

It is an incredibly catchy chorus, and the two dozen or so saints gathered for worship are belting it out. Many of their voices are thin and dry with age, yet when it comes time to sing, there is no choir I would rather hear. In many ways this is worship at its very best. Women and men from at least ten different Christian traditions gathering for worship: Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and more. These are retired pastors, missionaries, church secretaries, choir directors, and faithful laity who chose to move into a Christian retirement community. This family in Christ has walked a multitude of long pilgrim journeys, and they know God's faithfulness. We are gathered in the modest chapel in the basement, and it is my turn to lead worship and preach the gospel. Every time I come here to preach, I find myself singing in the car, "I love to tell

[1] Eliza Edmunds Hewitt, "When We All Get to Heaven" (public domain, 1898).

It is all too easy to take the biblical imagery of the New Jerusalem and make it solely into a type of other-worldly, gnostic spiritual future. The Christian understanding of the power of the resurrection and God's new creation push back against a simple understanding of heaven. God takes humanity and the world into a new reality that transcends our temptation toward a rejection of creation.

the story, for those who know it best . . ."[2] I love these people, and I trust that they really love me.

With Christian love comes challenge. The hymn quoted at the top of this essay is a challenge to me, and one I certainly would not pick. "When we all get to heaven . . ." The tune is undeniable, and it is a sure favorite of my friend Ava in Los Angeles, whose father was an AME preacher. I can see her fingers raised in a deviant "V" as she leads the congregation in singing, "We'll sing and shout the victory." As I head home from worship at the retirement community, I know this song will be stuck in my head. This irks me to no end. Our culture, particularly American Christianity, seems to have an obsession with heaven, which we cling to no matter how little biblical justification there is for it.

Throughout the Scriptures we are given glimpses of heaven and of post-resurrection-of-the-dead eternity.[3] Both sets of glimpses work prophetically to give us deeper understandings of who God is, who we are, and who we are in relationship. Both the glimpses of heaven and the glimpses of eternity are breath-taking, capturing the imagination in ways that draw us into deeper relationship with God, but these are not necessarily glimpses of the same thing. When we conflate heaven with the post-resurrection realities of the New Jerusalem, we run the risk of exchanging the life-giving promise of resurrection with a generic mythology of something better down the road. In John's depiction of the New Jerusalem in Revelation we are pointed to a post-resurrection reality that promises not only life after death, but also daily rebirth to kingdom living. Such resurrection reality is much more important, in the daily living of Christian life, than rest and reward after a life of unavoidable difficulty. The post-resurrection realities of the promised New Jerusalem serve to empower the everyday disciples of Christ to embrace life in the fullness of God's grace. What a spectacular promise, and yet we so often choose to proclaim heaven instead.

It should take little convincing that our culture is obsessed with heaven as the reward that awaits good and faithful people after death. There are countless books about heaven spanning almost every genre imaginable. Bible studies, stories about near-death experiences, children's books, books about dogs, new-age references, tomes about ethical living, fictional stories, and countless books about building a heaven on earth. One can even find romance novels assuming that heaven is a place where angels and humans might fall in love.[4] We have songs about heaven, art depicting heaven, even TV shows that involve weaving in and out of the heavenly realms. Heaven is what we are all hoping and aiming for, right? There is a general assumption that heaven is the ultimate reward for good people. But is this so?

[2] Kate Hankey, "I Love to Tell the Story" (public domain, 1866), st. 4.

[3] Throughout this article I use the term *post-resurrection* to refer to the reality after Jesus's final return accompanied by the judgment of the living and the dead. While there may be some eschatological debate about the exact order of operations, for the sake of this discussion, I am only really interested in the final, eternal, post-resurrection realities and choose to set to the side any questions about millennial rule, rapture, or even what happens to those who are not in Christ.

[4] Karen Neches, *Earthly Pleasures: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

While eschatological questions have always been a favorite topic of theology students and Bible geeks, it is easy for the everyday follower of Jesus to get lost in the weeds of life after death. When this happens, we tend to revert back to the images, ideas, and teachings we gleaned from the larger culture. The book of Revelation has so many widely divergent ways of being read that many Christians simply choose not to read it. Moreover, many find the questions about life after death so biblically obscure that it is easier just to trust that Charles Schulz, Gary Larson, and David Wiley Miller have it more or less right on Sunday mornings. Additionally, heaven is close to the tender parts of our hearts. We are comforted by ideas of the loved ones who have gone before us looking down on us from heaven. When Mom finally succumbs after a long, painful battle with cancer, nothing seems more important than to know that she is no longer in pain. Such times are not when we look to correct someone's assumptions of what awaits the faithful after death, but these seem to be the only times we talk about heaven. In the absence of clear, consistent, and persistent preaching and teaching about God's promise of resurrection we reduce life after death to the lowest common denominator, namely heaven.

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Now don't get me wrong, heaven seems like a pretty good deal. This is true especially because the best assumptions of heaven are things that are described as being true post-resurrection. Yes, every tear will be wiped dry, pain and suffering will be no more, and death will meet its demise (Rev 21:4). Yes, we are reunited with the saints, including family and friends, who have gone before us (1 Thess 4:17). Yes, we will be in the intimate presence of God (Rev 21:3). These are all realities that our cultural assumptions about heaven share with the realities of the New Jerusalem. But the New Jerusalem is so much more.

There are a number of key prophetic depictions of post-resurrection eternity in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isa 11:1–10) and the New Testament (e.g., John 14:2–3), but none are as complete and as compelling as the depiction of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5. What makes the proclamation of the New Jerusalem so much greater than a generic promise of heaven? Our culture's heaven is a reality reserved for the ever-after; the New Jerusalem finds its culmination in eternity, but it stretches deeply into our day-to-day living. Heaven is a reward that awaits us if we can hold on and be good enough or faithful enough; the New Jerusalem is a promise that builds us up toward love of God and love of neighbor. Heaven points our gaze back toward ourselves, while the New Jerusalem lifts our eyes toward a horizon marked by the freedom to share in God's proclamation of salvation.

The range and history of interpretations surrounding Revelation 21 and following are far too complex to dive into here, but when it comes to proclaiming

the promises of the New Jerusalem to everyday disciples of Jesus, there is a fine line we are invited to walk. God has purposefully used dramatic imagery to capture our hearts. As we teach about eternity, it is important to acknowledge that this language is metaphor, but it is vital that we do not reduce it to watered-down metaphorical niceties. Scripture's vivid images point to realities deeper than walls, foundations, gates, streets, rivers, and trees, but that does not mean the concrete images used have not actual presence in the eternal reality to which they point.[5]

As Revelation 21 opens, we are greeted by a cosmic collision of unprecedented proportions. God is well about the work of destroying the destroyers of the earth (Rev 11:18) when John looks and sees a "new heaven" and a "new earth." This is certainly good news. Throughout the proceedings of Revelation, we have seen the ongoing corruption of the earth and have noted the anguish, angst, and even wrath that exists within the heavens (e.g., Rev 15:7). While God is clearly ruler of all the cosmos and in ultimate control, neither heaven nor earth is exactly the type of place one would want to spend eternity. Certainly, we don't expect to find the martyrs cowering under the heavenly altar for all eternity (Rev 6:8–9). John sees that both heaven and earth have been made new; this is good. One assumes that this sort of resetting of the cosmos brings us to a point not unlike the splendor of Eden. Isn't this one of the ways we often think of heaven? A return to the innocence and unspoiled simplicity of the garden of creation.

This could indeed be something we might expect; after all, how could we possibly imagine an eternity better than Eden? In Eden humanity and God had an intimacy unknown after the fall. They were able to walk together, talk together, and even collaborate a little in the work of creation (Gen 1:26–2:25; 3:8). The garden was good, and things were very good between God and humanity. If Revelation 21:1 were the climax of John's prophetic vision, we may indeed look forward to eternity in a restored garden like the early days of Eve and Adam. But as Revelation has demonstrated, God doesn't tend to meet our expectations.[6] Eden was good, but it was no New Jerusalem. In the beginning the heavens and the earth were separate. God visited creation and allowed moments of intimacy, but God's dwelling place was in heaven. Adam collaborated with God in the naming of the creatures and was invited to participate in the maintenance of the garden, but the actual design and construction was left to God. Eden is an amazingly wonderful habitat for a well-loved pet.

At the climax of his vision, John first sees a new creation and a new earth, but they do not last. In the breath of space separating Revelation 21:1 from 21:2, the waters separating the two realms, along with the rebooted realities themselves,

[5] Both Koester and Bauckham do a wonderful job of unpacking the symbolism involved behind John's vision of the New Jerusalem. Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 191–200. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 126–143.

[6] Pointing out the unexpected twists throughout Revelation is a major theme in Koester's *Revelation*.

are no more.[7] It would seem that they have merged in a catastrophic collision forming something very different, yet still recognizable as being formed from the dust of both heaven and earth. Behold, the New Jerusalem descends like a bride. Unlike Eden, this is a place where God truly dwells with humanity. Unlike Eden, this is a place marked by humankind's creative handiwork. A city is, after all, the constructive work of people. In this eternal reality, walls, streets, and gates hold equal place with rivers, fruit trees, and angels. It would seem that even the political structures formed by wounded and sinful factions have a place in eternity. When humanity and divinity truly dwell together, as family, the result is an unimaginable escalation of the glories that marked both Eden and Jerusalem. Even that which we created in our brokenness out of our need to cope with the results of sin seems to be redeemed, sanctified, embellished, and incorporated into resurrection reality. Amazing!

I believe that it is absolutely an idolatrously over-realized eschatological perspective that believes humanity can create any sort of heaven on earth. However, it seems clear that God chooses to fully incorporate our creativity into the shaping of the eternal realms awaiting us post-resurrection. That God truly values our ingenuity and intellect means something for the way we live our lives today. If our hope lies in an eternal dwelling place in heaven, the creative work we do now is nothing more than marking time. If, on the other hand, the New Jerusalem incorporates our art, engineering, science, medicine, graphic design, and political structures, then our vocations in this life bear eternal significance in ways we may not have imagined.

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Earthly vocation will always have at its heart love of neighbor. As Luther points out, it is a false dichotomy to separate sacred and secular realms of being. The engineer who designs safe cars is engaged in a sacred work of protecting those who drive, but what would it mean if that same creative work were to be incorporated into the New Jerusalem? In the first century, there were few engineering problems that received more attention than the challenges involved with building walls, gates, and roads. These were the ubiquitous human-made structures from which the Roman Empire, broken and sinful though it was, was constructed. Is

[7] In the Genesis 1 account of creation water seems to form the membrane that must be separated to create space for heaven and earth. Here in Revelation 21, we see that in the very moment heaven and earth are rebooted, the watery barrier between them is taken away, allowing the two to combine in a sort of chemical reaction that is not entirely safe.

it a coincidence that these same structures are given a dominant place in John's vision of post-resurrection life? What if we have a very real role in designing the structures that will make up the New Jerusalem?

It is fascinating to me that so many of the details described in Revelation 21 are human creations—creations that could easily be categorized as maladaptive coping mechanisms developed by humanity in reaction to the realities of sin; structures that play essential roles in perpetuating and even advancing the brokenness of our world. What is the United States' wall along the southern boarder if not an attempt to mitigate some of our world's brokenness while exacerbating other geopolitical problems? What are nations and heads of state but a less than perfect way of dealing with the reality that, without governance, we run amok. Yet, too often, these political structures cause as much discord and harm as they prevent. If indeed nothing unclean will ever enter the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27), what are these seriously tainted, if not downright filthy, products of human ingenuity doing in eternity? It is the presence of gates, walls, and kings within the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:15–27) that boldly proclaims the promise of resurrection.

Every time I read Revelation 21 and 22 with congregation members, there is always a moment of wide-eyed, jaw-dropping shock when I get to verse 8:

> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Rev 21:8)

In part the surprise is because the Revised Common Lectionary has a handy way of skipping the uncomfortable verses in Revelation—which, it turns out, is the vast majority of the book. The lectionary even goes out of its way to whittle away more than a third of John of Patmos's description of the New Jerusalem, leaving only the happy-go-lucky verses floating without any context. It is not uncommon for lifelong Lutherans to think they know what the New Jerusalem is all about, only to hear 21:8 and find themselves stunned. Inevitably my parishioners ask themselves the same question I ask: "If these are the people who are excluded, how can I *ever* hope to get in?" Often the shock at hearing verse 8 is so strong that anything I read or say immediately afterward is completely lost. What happened to salvation by grace through faith? It seems as if, in the end, all that really matters is avoiding sin.

As one considers existence in post-resurrection eternity in light of Revelation 21:8, it is hard not to despair. I look at myself and see how my sin, and the sin of my neighbors, has indelibly marked and shaped every aspect of who I am. Can one so tainted truly be welcome in God's presence for all eternity? Won't my sin just continue to make a mess of things in the ever-after? Perhaps all that is not as it is supposed to be will be obliterated, like dross removed from gold, in the fires of the second death (Rev 21:8). But if all that is sinful in my life is completely removed, will anything recognizable be left? My wounds and scars, guilt and shame, pride and lust seem essential to me being me. Don't get me wrong—sin is very real in

my life, and I seek daily assistance from the Holy Spirit to remove my character defects. Sin has shaped and permeated my being; my sin is a real problem for me, and especially for my neighbor. Yet, if God loves me just as I am, would God choose to spend eternity with someone who is unrecognizable as the one God loved in this earthly life?

It is at exactly this moment that trusting the promise of resurrection, rather than some uninterrupted heavenly continuation of life after death, makes all the difference. While incorporating human ingenuity into post-resurrection reality, God does not simply take it as it is. Walls are not topped with concertina wire and built of iron-reinforced concrete; they are redeemed, formed from jasper, and built to stunningly inspiring proportions (Rev 21:15–18). Gates no longer exist as impenetrable security checkpoints; they are recreated as constantly open portals, carved from gigantic pearls, welcoming us home. Kings and nations are no longer warring factions bent on self-advancement (Rev 21:24); they are glorified as a unified collection of diverse peoples who magnify God's glory. God does not simply extend the life of our inventions into a heavenly future; rather, our ingenious creations are put to death, redeemed, recreated, and glorified in the "big bang" that comes with the combining of heaven and earth.

In John's prophetic vision I am pointed to the promise that all of who I am, saturated though I be by sin, shall be redeemed, resurrected, and glorified. Like a border wall reforged and reshaped into a shining wall of jasper, I too will be reforged in such a way that my wounds, brokenness, and stains will be transformed from curses to blessings.

The physical world, including the products of human imagination, is looking forward to a glorified post-resurrection existence. This should come as no surprise; we know that all of creation is yearning to be redeemed (Rom 8:22–23). We know that, in Jesus's resurrection, the very wounds that killed him were transformed from curse to blessing (John 20:26–28). We know that through baptism we are united with Christ in death so we may experience the promise of new life in the form of a resurrection like his (Rom 6:4–5). Revelation's vision of a physical world redeemed, resurrected, and glorified serves as a model for how Jesus bears his people, safe and whole, into eternity.

Because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I trust that my name is written in the book of life (Rev 20:12–15; 21:27). I know that I belong in the New Jerusalem. In John's prophetic vision I am pointed to the promise that all of who I am, saturated though I be by sin, shall be redeemed, resurrected, and glorified. Like a border wall reforged and reshaped into a shining wall of jasper, I too will be reforged in such a way that my wounds, brokenness, and stains will be transformed from curses to blessings. After his resurrection, Jesus's wounds

and the cross on which he was tortured to death were redeemed as blessings for Thomas, for the other apostles, and for you and me. No one who stood at the foot of the cross on Good Friday could have possibly imagined that reality. So it will be at our resurrection. Parts of my life are so gut-wrenchingly awful that I cannot imagine how they could be a part of my life in the New Jerusalem. But through the forge of death, resurrection makes all things new.

I get that heaven language is not completely alien to our Scriptures. I get that it is awkward to jettison referring to our promised life after death as heaven. Nonetheless, the promises of resurrection and eternal life as citizens of the New Jerusalem are so far removed from our culture's bland, squishy understanding of heaven that it is best to avoid any confusion of the two. In my preaching, teaching, and pastoral care I avoid the "H-word" at all cost. More than this, I choose to proclaim the promise of lives redeemed, resurrected, and glorified as often as possible. When we point to a hope in heaven, we tell people, "Hold on, and you can make it." When we point to the promises of New Jerusalem, we proclaim, "Live your life to the fullest for the kingdom of God, because who you are and what you do matters today, tomorrow, and for all eternity." I don't go so far as to ban hymns like "When We All Get to Heaven," out of respect for the saints who have gone before me, but when we do sing such a song, you better believe I am preaching resurrection.

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