



SERIES: Life After Death Wk. 2

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It's interesting when people talk about Heaven, how quickly they divert into discussions of eschatology -what happens when and trying to figure all this out - and in the process they lose their focus on Heaven.

I would suggest to you most Christians have very strong opinions about their eschatology, about end times events, and a very weak theology about Heaven. I would also suggest to you that is exactly backwards from the focus of the New Testament writers. C.S. Lewis once said, history will record that those with the best theology of Heaven will be those who are most effective on Earth. And I think he's right. I think he's right, and I think often we've made a mistake in diverting our attention to the timing and details of things that simply are guesswork at best. And in the process, our attention is diverted away from what really is the focus of the New Testament writers.

I think there's a very good possibility that if we had different presenters of different eschatological systems get on the platform and try to make their case, and you had the writers of Scripture sitting in the front pew, they would get about halfway through the event and they would say, what in the world are you people talking about? Because it's very possible, none of us have it right. The Biblical writers simply did not emphasize the dates and timing and all the eschatological details. What we all agree on is that Jesus is coming back and there was this focus on the Heaven to come. And that has the potential to radically change how we live our lives today.

If you've been with us through this series, we started talking about the literal, physical, bodily Resurrection of Jesus, understanding that that's more than just his affirmation, that he indeed was God. But that is a *first fruit*. That is a picture. That's a pledge. That's a promise of the Resurrection to come. It's the basis by which we believe there's life after death, but more than that, that we believe that we too will experience a literal, physical, bodily Resurrection from the dead, and that is where our theology of Heaven begins.

When I understand that one day I will be literally, physically, bodily raised from the dead, it helps me begin to answer some common questions. If you think about common questions that maybe aren't answered directly, there's two things you need to think about: One is the ramifications of a physical, bodily Resurrection and all that goes with that.

Second, is think through God's value system. God does not have two different value systems. He doesn't have a heavenly value system and an earthly value system. God has a value system and that value system is in place here on Earth, and that value system will matter to him in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

So we start to run through questions like, when I get to Heaven, will I still be me? And the answer is yes. The idea of a physical, literal, bodily Resurrection is I will be me as God has made me, with my memories, with my experiences, with my personality, I will be me. That's the whole point.

When we start thinking about a spirit that's disembodied and enters into some weird mystical world somewhere in the universe, that's much more gnostic than it is Biblical. It's much more Plato than it is Paul.

I literally, physically, bodily will be raised from the dead. Will I be me? Yes, I, will. Will there be gender in Heaven? Yes, there will be. You will be you. You're not genderless today; you will not be genderless then. You will have gender. Yes. Will I know Patti as my wife? The answer is yes. When Jesus was asked the question, if someone has married several different husbands, you know, what will be the deal in Heaven? And Jesus said they will not be given in marriage. He was simply saying, people will not continue to marry and procreate in Heaven, but it does not mean I'll go get to Heaven and look at Patti and say, who are you?

I didn't come up with the idea of marriage. God did. I didn't come up with the idea of having my children. God did. I didn't invent the notion of family. God did. These are God's values. They don't just go away when we get in the presence of God. I will know that I have spent 27 wonderful years with Patti and that will be meaningful. Will my girls know that I am their dad? Yes they will - that's God's value system. Will, I know my own parents in Heaven. Yes, I will. That's the point of the physical, bodily, Resurrection. I won't be something else. I will be me resurrected and changed.

So you think through what does God value today? He values relationships. He values community. The things that God values today don't just go away in the Heaven to come. They are God's values.

So we can begin to think through our questions in that way. We want to talk about the New Heaven and the New Earth, Revelation 21 and 22. En route to that, I'm going to ask you to take a quick rest stop at Hebrews chapter 11. I just want to confirm the point again, that all the way back as far back as Abraham, what was the driving motivation of these saints of faith was they believed that there was a Heavenly City, whose designer and builder was God. That's a driving theology in both the Old and New Testament that dramatically affects the way that we live our lives.

Hebrews 11 if you're not familiar with it, is often referred to as the *Faith Hall of Fame*. It's a record of the great saints of old and the great steps of faith they took to trust God.

We pick it up in verse eight,

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (NASB, Hebrews 11:8-10)

Skip down to verse 13,

"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking the country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went 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 a city for them." (Vs. 13-16)

Very clearly saying that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, these great people of faith, were headed for a Heavenly City. They understood ultimately the focus on Heaven.

When Jesus left, Jesus said, *I go to prepare a place for you*, John Chapter 14. By the time you get to Hebrews chapter 11, the verb tense is he **has built** the city, so it raises a question, was the city actually already built by then?

There's a similar statement in Galatians chapter four, where Paul talks about the Jerusalem in Heaven *is* free, and the language sounds like it's already there. It raises the question, is it possible that this New Jerusalem that comes down out of Heaven in Revelation 21 is actually the intermediate heaven, the place where believers go in the intermediate stage, and the answer would be, I would say that's a possibility. It's actually a very good possibility; that language seems to kind of hint at that.

With that in mind, let's go all the way then to Revelation 21 and 22. Revelation chapter 20 is the judgment, the battle, smoke and fire, the end of what we refer to as the Millennial Kingdom. It all comes to a close, and then in comes the New Heaven and the New Earth.

To bring the whole picture together to review from last week, you go back and notice how closely Genesis 1 and 2 align themselves with Revelation 21 and 22: a lot of similarities.

We were reminded that in Revelation 21 and 22, God literally came to Earth, Heaven came to Earth, so that God could have a relationship with people that He had created in His image, in this place called Paradise - to the extent that they actually walked together in the Garden - Heaven came to Earth.

But in Genesis chapter three, sin enters the picture and separates a holy God from sinful people. Therefore, once again, there's this separation between Heaven and Earth. Of course, the rest of the Bible is God's plan to put it all back together again. The next big moment of Heaven and Earth coming back together again is the Incarnation, where God Himself becomes human flesh, Heaven and Earth come together again, in the person of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:10 - that Heaven and Earth are summed up together in the person of Jesus.

Jesus then died on the cross in payment for the sins of the world, that which separates Heaven and Earth, that those who place their faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross can know the forgiveness of sin, and it's possible again for Heaven and Earth to come together.

The church is a picture of that because we are told we are citizens of Heaven but living out our citizenship on Earth. So, we have this picture of Heaven and Earth coming together again. The

church is a colony of citizens of Heaven. We are resident aliens on Earth, because we belong in Heaven, but we have this wonderful picture of a Heavenly Kingdom being lived out on Earth.

It moves all the way through then to what we would refer to as the *Millennial Kingdom*, which is one step closer to the finished product, where Jesus comes, and literally, physically, bodily reigns for a thousand years on this Earth, and it's one step closer to the finished Kingdom. And then finally at the end of that, you hit Revelation 21: the New Heaven, the New Earth, everything finally sets in and the plan is finished and completed.

With that in mind, Revelation 21 one,

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning or crying or pain; the first things have passed away.'" (Rev. 21:1-4)

This magnificent scene where the New Jerusalem already constructed comes down to Earth and our eternal existence, what we often refer to as Heaven, is actually lived out on this Earth that has been redeemed. It's been reconciled. It's been made new.

The language of Revelation 21 is the language of Second Corinthians 5: 17, "*In Christ, you have become a new creation. Old things are passed away. All things have become new.*" You yourself were not annihilated. You were redeemed. God made you. God redeemed you. That's the whole point of the physical, bodily resurrection. What God originally created, Genesis one and two, God did not say, *I don't like this*. God said, *This is good. I like this*. This is what God intended.

Now we get to the end and God doesn't say, *I've changed my mind*. God is going back to what he started with, and saying from the beginning, *this was good*. God is not annihilating the Earth and starting over. He's redeeming the Earth.

Romans chapter eight, God is redeeming all creation, summing it all up in Christ. It's His ultimate statement of victory. Satan hasn't messed everything up so badly that God has to scrap it and start over. Rather God is ultimately redeeming it back to what He intended. And so there's this magnificent picture of the Earth being renewed and redeemed back as God intended.

Verse five,

"And He who sits on the throne, said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' And He *said, 'Write, for these words are faithful and true.' Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.'" (Vs. 5-6)

That's a very powerful statement. When you talk about all these stages that go from Genesis 3 all the way through to that moment, when finally, God says, *It is done*. All creation has been redeemed, has been brought together. It's all been made new and now it is Paradise forever.

Mission accomplished. Alpha, the first letter of the Greek Alphabet; Omega, the last letter. *I am the beginning. I am the end*; finished, mission accomplished.

Oftentimes people ask the question, will we have desires in Heaven? So, what makes this idea of those *who thirst* will be satisfied with this *water of life*? I think the answer is, yes. We have to be very careful that we don't create a theology that says, I now have become God myself. I have not become God. I will still always be dependent on God. I was still always need to be surrendered to God. That will define life in the eternal Paradise. Therefore, will I thirst? Yes, I will. Will I hunger? Yes, I will, but it will be perfectly, completely utterly satisfied. That's the point. Satisfied in what God provides forever.

Verse seven,

"He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Vs. 7-8)

He is saying that those who are the overcomers get in, those who have rejected Christ don't make it in. It's a little bit of a review. It's very important that we define that term *overcomers* as it's been defined throughout the book of Revelation. An overcomer is not one who has persevered and outperformed everybody else. As a matter of fact, it's the very opposite of that. The overcomer is the one who recognized the need for a Savior, trusted Jesus' death on the cross, on the basis of Jesus' shed blood and the power of the Spirit, their sin has been overcome and they become a child of God. Those are the overcomers.

It is not saying that there will not be people in Heaven that have lied, that have committed adultery, that have committed murder, that have cheated. Basically, you go through the list and it could define every single one of us. The issue is this though: if I've rejected Jesus as Savior, then what defines me is my sin.

Therefore, yes on Earth, I may have committed adultery, I may have cheated, I may have lied, I may have done these things in the list, but if I have trusted Jesus as Savior, on the basis of Jesus' shed blood and the power of the Spirit, that has been overcome, and I'm a child of God. But if I reject Jesus as Savior, then I am what I am. I am an adulterer. I am a liar. I am... ..right down through the list. So that's the point of that particular part of the text there.

"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, 'Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall with 12 gates and at the gates 12 angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the 12 tribes of the sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had 12 foundation stones, and on them were the 12 names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb."

There's a lot in that text as the New Jerusalem comes down out of Heaven to Earth. It's very important to understand, ultimately where we will spend eternity is on this Earth as it's been

redeemed and made new with Heaven coming to Earth in this city that's been built called the New Jerusalem.

Arnie: So Bryan, why do you think theology of Heaven has taken a backseat to all the talk about *end times*?

Bryan: I think we certainly would all agree that's true. So I'm not completely sure. I think part of it might be like the immediate is more interesting than the distant future. So if I have money and I have to choose between buying a car or putting it in my retirement account, I'd probably buy the car. You know that's immediate. [Right] We struggle with the future stuff. Part of it may just be the curiosity. I think people with eschatology, with end-times theology, feel like they're predicting the future. They're trying to figure out how all the pieces fit together. And there's kind of a curiosity to that, that appeals to people. And there's, as you know, a lot of argument about who's right and who's wrong and honestly, godly people, that have studied the Bible cover to cover, disagree on a lot of the details.

Bryan: What I think is interesting is how many churches have split over end times theology, when you think the whole point is to give us hope. So if that approach is splitting churches, wouldn't that be a bit of a clue that maybe we're not on track? You know, the persecuted churches in the first century weren't arguing about eschatology. They were being persecuted, they were being put to death, they were thrown in prison. It all came down to the hope of the Gospel. Jesus is coming back and that's what gives them hope.

Bryan: So maybe we've misunderstood the point of end times theology. I think that's part of it. Maybe it's, we're trying to address our own fears. You know, when you go in for surgery, they usually map out, here's what you can expect, here's what's going to happen, here's the recovery. And they do that to try to help you alleviate your fears. So maybe people feel like, if I know what's going to happen, how it's going to happen, it makes me less fearful.

Cara: So if we believe that, from the beginning, God created everything and He says, *it's good*, then it only makes sense that instead of destroying His creation, He's going to restore it.

Bryan: Yeah, it makes sense on a couple fronts. One is, as we've talked about, it's the message, God wins. I don't want a theology where Satan wins round one and God wins round two. I want a theology where God wins. God wins fully, totally, completely - King of Kings, Lord of Lords, you know, big God theology. So even with our bodies, I think a lot of Christians miss the idea that this body goes in the grave, but will be resurrected and changed. There's such a message in that, that even this is going to be resurrected and changed and will be part of my story forever. It's part of the picture of complete and total victory by God.

Bryan: But the other thing that's interesting to think about is, so Genesis 1 and 2 - pleasurable to look at, pleasurable to eat. God says *this is good*. So let's say that's plan A. So if plan A gets destroyed, then what's the New Heaven and the New Earth? Is it plan B or was Genesis one and

two B and New Heaven and New Earth is A. I think Biblically, you run into a lot of problems trying to figure that out, unless the beginning was plan A, and God redeems and restores all of it back, and it's plan A all the way into eternity.