

An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

BY HAROLD T. BRYSON

When John sees “a new heaven and a new earth,” he is not witnessing a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed.

Revelation 21:1-8

Life is so much “with us” that we scarcely take time for anything but the present. Daily duties stare at us. We live so much in the present that little time is available to reflect on the past or to think about the future.

Meeting friends from high school and college may force us to talk about former years. Or when we look through a family picture album, we may think about what it was like “when.”

A severe illness, the death of a friend, or a national tragedy may move us to ask, “What is life like beyond the grave?” If occasionally our minds wander to thoughts about what it will be like after we die, we dwell on the subject for only a short while, and quickly move away.

Yet people would like to know if there is a life beyond death, and if there is one, what it is like. Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life* became a *New York Times* bestseller in 2004. In this book Piper recounts a tragic car accident in which, according to medical personnel, he died instantly. While he lay lifeless in the car, he experienced what he describes as being awed by beauty and music and the glories of the afterlife. Later Piper returned miraculously to life on earth. He supposedly spent ninety minutes in heaven.

The success of Piper’s book and others like it indicates that people want to know what happens to them after they die. Inquirers could better turn to

divine revelation for this kind of insight. One of the best places to learn about the believer's experience of life after death is Revelation 21, where John portrays the life beyond in a variety of earthy symbols. John's vision from God gives the theological meaning of the life beyond. His expressions "a new heaven and a new earth" and "the new Jerusalem" give us insight into what believers call heaven.

This is not John's human speculation or imagination about the end times, but it is a divine revelation to John. The vision furnishes us with theological truths.

INTIMACY

When John writes that he "saw a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1a), he is not witnessing a *replaced* heaven and earth, but a *redeemed* or *rejuvenated* heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed.

John saw the New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2b). This symbol depicts the greatest earthly intimacy between two human beings on a life of pilgrimage together. Marriage has many exciting experiences — taking trips together, creating a home together, having children together, and attending events together. Did you notice that the word "together" appears in all of the endeavors of marriage? Intimacy in marriage means more than just sexual union. It means the art of sharing life together. Some of the most memorable times that my wife Jane and I have are those times of simply being together. She may be on the couch reading the newspaper while I read a novel. Or we may head to the mountains with a picnic lunch to share by a flowing stream. The beauty of the mountains, the soothing sound of the stream, and even the good food cannot compare to the joy of our being together.

The Christian life resembles marriage because it is opening our lives to God. We do this through increasing intimacy with Jesus Christ. When life ends, the life beyond means intensified intimacy with Christ. Paul wrote, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Do you think Paul's concept of "gain" meant golden streets, pearly gates, and mansions? I do not think so. He meant that after death he would have greater intimacy with Christ. Beyond death, disciples will experience a greater intimacy with God because every barrier to right relationship will be removed. John says, "God himself will be with them" (21:3b).

I once thought about heaven in terms of what I would do and see there. Now, because of Scripture, I think of heaven in terms of this incredible intimacy with God and with God's people. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.

COMMUNITY

“And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,” John continues (21:2a). This city is immense in size, with elaborate walls, foundations, and gates made of luxurious materials (21:9-27).

For a long time I could only think of heaven with literalistic descriptions. But in my pilgrimage of studying Revelation 21, I realized that the author did not have the mind of an architect or a decorator, but of a theologian. What is the theology (rather than the design or décor) of the New Jerusalem? It is a city filled with people, and its newness is in the regard to the redemption of human relationships.

Suspicion, disagreements, alienation, arguments, slander, and hatred characterize relationships in the “old earth,” where we live now. Court rooms are crowded with litigants over human conflicts; no matter how hard our leaders try, peace eludes them. In the New Jerusalem, however, redeemed people live together harmoniously: they love, respect, care, help, and encourage each other. It is a genuine community where everyone shares Christ as Savior and has been changed by him.

Life in the New Jerusalem has a new order of transformed relationships. The rabbinic illustration is old and I do not know its original source, but I love it.

Rabbi Mendel wanted to know what heaven and hell looked like, and the prophet Elijah took him to show him. Elijah led him into a large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a huge pot of spoons that were longer than their arms, and because the people could not eat with these spoons, they sat around the table and starved. Rabbi Mendel found this room and what he saw there so terrible that he quickly ran outside.... Then Elijah took Rabbi Mendel to heaven and into another large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a big pot of steaming soup on it. Around the table sat people with the same spoons, but they did not have to starve because they were feeding each other.†

WELLNESS

“[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” John explains. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (21:4). The inhabitants of the Holy City enjoy complete wellness. They have no more tears because everything that can rob life of vibrancy and joy has “passed away” in the New Jerusalem.

Think of all the battles that we have now with physical, emotional, and mental illnesses. We live with the debilitating dread of heart problems, cancer, Alzheimer’s, and numerous other diseases. We may be killed by accidents, storms, or terrorist attacks. Fear, anxiety, and depression plague us because while we live on earth, death is always a threat.

I once had a physician who was an amateur philosopher. After he examining me and writing a prescription, he startled me by admitting: "We live from one episode of sickness to another. We only have periods of wellness." While that philosophy is somewhat pessimistic, he was right. Perfect health eludes us in the old order of earth.

Nothing will cause God's people to suffer after death. Neither emotional anguish nor physical pain will be present in the New Jerusalem. They will not dread death, for death will have been abolished. It will be a wonderful experience of perfect wellness.

PERFECTION

At times people think they have found earth's idyllic place and experience. But they soon discover that life on earth is never ideal because of the continual presence of self will, self trust, and self assertion in everybody's life. These qualities make life on earth lack fulfillment.

In John's description of the New Jerusalem, he gave a profile of the population. He spoke first of those whose lives had been made perfect by Christ. They enjoy full fellowship with God and with God's people. Then John spoke of another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: "The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars" (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others. The life beyond for believers involves the experience of sinless perfection.

My understanding of the life beyond for believers has taken a different direction. I once sang about a beautiful place with streets of gold and gates of pearl. I even thought of having a mansion in heaven. But my expressions changed when I took an authoritative look into the life beyond for believers recorded in Revelation chapter 21. Now I say, "Wow! What a wonderful future! Incredible intimacy with God, perfect relationships with people, complete wellness, and the absolute absence of evil—it cannot get any better than that!"

NOTE

† Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 159-160.



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