

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 33, Number 4

January 24, 2016



## A New Heaven and a New Earth

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)*

At the beginning of the last study, I mentioned that I offered my thoughts on this context with a loose grip. I have read and discussed these passages with a number of respected men and writers. They do not all agree or hold to the same interpretation of the passages. As I read and study these lessons, I can see potential for more than one view, none of which contradicts any essential doctrine set forth in the literal passages of the Bible. As indicated, our interpretation of Scripture should always follow the literal passages and their clear teachings. The symbolic passages such as those before us now should always submit to and be interpreted in harmony with the literal passages. In addition, any lesson from Revelation must be interpreted in a manner that would have been relevant and comforting to John's suffering, persecuted first century original readers. Imaginative interpretations that would give little or no immediate comfort to those first century readers should be wholly rejected.

*Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. (2 Peter 3:11-13)*

Because of Peter's similar language in a far more literal context, I am inclined to believe that John intended to give his readers then and now reason to look forward with joyful anticipation to the day when they would enter that world of glory in the Lord's presence. That said, I do appreciate the thought that John intended to describe the Lord's present or temporal blessings on His faithful people in the here and now. As I read the whole chapter, however, it seems that John says too much for the words to fit the temporal view as comfortably as I see them fitting the view that I will here set forth.

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. Again, this language is quite similar to Peter's language. What might we learn from John's writings here?*

The first and most dominant thought that occurs to me is John's association of that heaven and earth with this heaven and earth, though the whole chapter that follows will underscore one contrast after another, all contrasts that tell us that the new heaven and new earth are immeasurably superior to the heaven and earth that we now occupy.

Consider that the present heaven and earth, this globe on which we live along with the canopy of atmosphere that surrounds it, is a wholly suitable place for us to live and to carry on all the activities of a God-glorifying life. How much more shall heaven, whatever its detailed content, wholly satisfy every need that we shall have. Everything necessary for that glorious place to be truly and wholly "Heaven" shall be present and fully supplied for the joyful praise of God by His beloved children.

I reject endless speculations that associate heaven more with this world, often striving to find Scripture to support the speculation. Examples. Will my favorite pets be in heaven? Will I know Uncle Joe or Grandpa in heaven as I knew him here? I once heard a very emotional and equally sincere believer complain that, if he thought he wouldn't have full knowledge and continuation of his relationship with a dear aunt who raised him and loved him dearly, he would just as soon not go there. Obviously the thought was far more based on emotion than on Scripture. All of what the Lord has in store for us in heaven shall be wholly satisfactory, gloriously so, for all the beloved and redeemed who shall inhabit that world to enjoy their God and Savior far beyond anything they can here imagine. A word of simple caution. When you think about that world, avoid trying to make this world the controlling factor in heaven. You will only set your present mindset up for disappointment and a far lower anticipation and joy as you contemplate it than you might rightly draw from Scripture alone. If Scripture doesn't mention something as being part

of heaven, don't waste your time thinking about it or wishing for it to be there, despite Scripture's silence. Follow Scripture. Period.

What John describes here is a whole new heaven and a whole new earth, not just a tedious and endless church service that never ends. People somewhat teasingly—and often quite seriously—complain about long-winded preachers, occasionally shifting from this complaint to fear that heaven shall be one endless, eternal church service. **They do not find this idea in Scripture.** While Scripture never indulges human imagination about heaven, it does on occasion give us a brief glimpse into that glory world. And Scripture never even once hints that this endless church idea is an accurate description of heaven. When Scripture reveals anything about heaven, it describes a complete world that addresses and gloriously meets every God-glorifying need and desire of the redeemed who shall inhabit that world. The passage from 2 Peter 3 serves as just one such example, as does, I believe, the passage before us. In his description, Peter raises a whole world that God created, a whole world that existed before the flood, a whole world that now exists, and a whole world that we look for and joyfully anticipate in heaven.

At one time, I tried to interpret 2 Peter 3 as indicative that God shall melt down this world and recreate it as heaven for eternity. The simple and contextual information contained in that chapter will not support this idea. Joyfully, I had to repent and change my view. One descriptive comment in that context closes the door to such an interpretation.

*Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.* (2 Peter 3:13)

Notice the present tense verb in the last clause of the verse, "...wherein **dwelleth** righteousness." Heaven's glory is not a yet-future place that shall be formed. It exists right now, and righteousness—only righteousness—dwells there as a mode of conduct and life. Another Biblical point that supports this view deals with Jesus' resurrected, glorified, and ascended body. For His body to have literally arisen and to presently exist in glory, that heavenly glory must be a literal place that exists right now, a literal place where His resurrected and glorified human body now resides.

*And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* Consider this thought in light of Paul's literal description of the Lord's return with His people.

*For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not*

*prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.* (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18)

The whole of heaven's glory shall accompany the Lord when He returns to raise the dead, judge and sentence the wicked, and take His children home, body, soul, and spirit.

John associates the Lord's return for His people to a first century Jewish wedding celebration. First and foremost, just as today, a wedding was a joyous occasion. Secondly, the first century Jewish wedding tradition designed a central element of surprise. The general time frame was known, but not the specific time. When the preparations were completed, the bride and her attendants or friends would gather and make their preparations for the happy event. There was something of a friendly contest between the bride and her attendants and the groom and his attendants. The bride hoped to be so prepared that the moment the groom arrived she would immediately walk out to greet him and accompany him to the place of celebration. And the groom would work to surprise the bride, hoping to catch her in any way unprepared. This little "Competition" was done with excitement and playful joy. It unfolded as a joyful part of the whole wedding event. When we read the Scriptures regarding the Second Coming, Scripture consistently depicts the event as a surprise; it shall occur at a time unexpected. And Scripture also teaches that believers who joyfully anticipate and expect His return should live every day as if the Lord would return before the end of the day. In John's description, the Lord returns with His bride; that is with their souls and/or spirits—or both—to raise the dead and thus to begin the glorious eternal—never ending—wedding celebration of joy in heaven. Rather than the populist idea that the wedding supper of the Lamb shall include only the most elite of believers, this passage suggests that all the redeemed shall be present and shall fully enjoy their eternal bliss in an endless celebration with their Lord.

For the folks who tend to wrestle with the idea that heaven shall be one endless church service, I offer one central thought. Can you even remotely imagine any kind of event or celebration that is wholly worthy of the Lord and that worthily celebrates His redemption of His people from their sins and that suitably praises Him for eternity? No. Good! For that is precisely what heaven in whatever glorious form the Lord shall give it shall be. Come quickly!

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
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Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor