

The Last Things #20 A new heaven and earth – something to look forward to

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2 Peter 3

The Day of the Lord

¹ Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ² I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

³ Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴ They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶ By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷ By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

¹⁷ Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

Introduction

Some years back I did a series on the Last Things but didn't cover all the topics I wanted to cover. I kept being asked how long I was going to carry on with the theme, so I stopped. One of the topics I wanted to deal with was what happens after the Lord's return and the Final Judgement and how does this relate to the idea of Heaven. The passage in 2 Peter is an important one in answering this question. The idea that God will at the end create a new heavens and a new earth i.e. a new universe, is also found in Isaiah 65 and 66 and in Revelation 21.

Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷ "See, I will create **new heavens and a new earth.**

The former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind.

¹⁸ *But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.*

¹⁹ *I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.*

²⁰ *“Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.*
²¹ *They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*
²² *No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.*
²³ *They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.*
²⁴ *Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.*
²⁵ *The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.*

Revelation 21: 1-4

A New Heaven and a New Earth

¹ *Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

There is a clearly a consistent picture here of what will happen at the end of time and history but the first problem is how does the new heavens and earth relate to Heaven? The word ‘heaven(s)’ has several meanings in the Bible: it can refer to the sky and the atmosphere (as in heaven and earth or the heavens); it can refer to a spiritual dimension as in ‘the heavenly places’; and it can refer to heaven, the dwelling place of God and the final destination of believers. The multiple use of the same word can cause confusion and a tendency to confuse the spiritual with the physical e.g. believing that heaven (the final destination) is straight up and is located somewhere in the sky. As when the first Russian cosmonauts in space said, “We have been into space and we have not found God!” The second problem is, how does this new heavens and new earth relate to the present heaven and earth?

A new beginning in a new creation

Heaven is real but it does not have a physical location in relation to this present world. It is not up there or out there in space. However, the teaching of 2 Peter (and Rev. 21) indicates that the new heavens and earth is the same as Heaven: it is where God dwells with His people; it has a physical reality (though not identical to this present creation) and it is occupied by believers in their new, spiritual bodies (as described in 1 Cor. 15). There is a danger in thinking of heaven in ‘up there’ in some undefined way and in ethereal, insubstantial terms, made worse by popular ideas of heaven with harps and clouds and disembodied spirits. We tend to have a view of Heaven that is purely spiritual. In between physical death and the second coming of Christ, believers are alive with Christ in some way, but we are not told exactly in what form or in what location. They are not asleep but neither are they in their final bodies or location, which is Heaven, and where they will be reunited with their body at the general Resurrection and with those believers who are still alive at the Lord’s return. (1 Thess. 4:16-17) This period between death and the second coming of Christ is a waiting stage – waiting for the Lord’s return, and the final consummation, the last judgement and the destruction of this creation in preparation for the new heaven and earth. However, the believer is present with the Lord during this time but this is not the final state of either the believer or the physical creation.

This present world is imperfect in many ways; all living things eventually die and decay; everything is affected to one degree or other by sin; science tells us that the present universe is running down and is slowly decaying. In order to become a place where God can dwell with His people this creation has to have a complete makeover: it has to be made perfect and sinless. **How can that be done?** Peter explains that this requires a cataclysmic event, an intervention by God to make all things new:

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (v.7)

¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. (v.10)*

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. (v.12, 13)

Not only does that day mean the destruction of the ungodly and the elimination of sin, it also means a complete destruction and transformation of the present creation in order to make a new and perfect creation. Peter is talking about the creation of a new heavens and a new earth. Both Isaiah ch. 65 and Revelation ch. 21 describe the same things about this new creation: it is a place where there is no more death or disease, no more pain or suffering.

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev. 21:4)

It is also one where animals are present as well as humans: "*The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox*" but the old relationships have been changed between animals and between humans and animals. Notice that the old order of things has passed away because we are in a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation, a new universe. Paul writing in Romans 8:18-21 looks forward to the same day: ¹⁸ *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

The creation will be liberated, set free, from its bondage to decay because there can be no decay in that future glorious state, which is the future both of the believer in Christ but also of God's creation.

We are not told all the details as to how this transformation will occur and many of the descriptions are clearly poetic, as the reality is beyond words and beyond our understanding. Heaven will be real, it will be physical (in some way), it will be a recreating of the original perfect creation, and people and animals will live in harmony with each other, and with God the Father and the Lord Jesus. Will it encompass the whole universe? Probably as the description of the last day and the final description has a cosmic as well as an earthly dimension.

²⁹ *"Immediately after the distress of those days
"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' (Matt.24:29)*

Also the Hebrew use of the phrase 'heavens and earth' referred to all their observable world i.e. what we would call the universe. In summary we can say that the new heavens and the new earth and Heaven are the same – it is where believers will spend eternity; secondly, the new heaven and earth has a relationship to the

present heaven and earth but it has been transformed and remade, much as our resurrection bodies are related to our present bodies: they are related but different. Just as in 1 Cor. 3:10-15 we are told that our works will be tested by fire to destroy all that is worthless and what survives will be permanent, *“It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work”* (1 Cor. 3:13b), so the universe will be tested by fire to purify it and remove all sin.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which is the Christian hope for the future, and the doctrine of a ‘new heavens and a new earth’ together confirm and remind us that God values the physical bodies that he created, as well as the whole of His creation, and His intention is to restore them at the end of the age. They will not be less than they were but more; they will not be less substantial but more substantial; they will not have the limitations and imperfections of the present age, and sin will have no place in God’s new creation.

How should we then live?

Many Christians have wasted their time and their lives in fruitless speculation about the future – the timing, the sequence of events, what exactly will happen, the geography of the new Jerusalem and what Heaven will be like. How much time, ink and paper have been wasted on these speculations? They are mostly just that – speculation, and are usually wrong in their predictions, except in the most general sense, as only the Father knows the time and date, and we aren’t given enough information to describe the timetable or the topography of heaven. To speak frankly, Heaven is beyond our comprehension as is the means by which God will bring it about. All our ideas and schemes and timetables will not affect in any way what will actually happen – I believe everyone will be surprised on that day by what God is going to do.

Peter doesn’t take the speculative approach in his letter, but rather asks what kind of people we should be, if this is what is going to happen in the future. **This is a much more important question.** We do not know and cannot know in detail what the future holds, or when the Lord will return or how God will destroy and then recreate the heavens and the earth. But we can prepare ourselves for what God will do in the future.

Peter’s advice is practical and relevant. We are to live godly and holy lives here and now. (v.11) We are to *“make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”* (v.14) We are to be on our guard so we aren’t carried away by false teachings and speculations. (v.17) We are to *“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”* (v.18) Our character is what matters to God. God is preparing us for Heaven day by day as we walk with Christ. It is not what we do but who we are that is important to God. He is not only delaying the end to allow as many people as possible to turn to Christ and be saved, but also to allow time for God to work in our lives through his Holy Spirit. We will all have to be transformed and changed at the end, but there will be continuity with what we are now. We will be the same people in heaven, in the new heaven and earth, but we will be transformed and perfected and fully cleansed from sin. We will know each other but all the imperfections in our relationships will be removed.

We don’t know exactly what Heaven will be like or precisely what we will do but we know it will exceed our expectations: it will be perfect; it will be what we have been waiting for all our lives; it is what we were made for and what we are being prepared for. Heaven cannot be less than our human imaginings, but greater; it will meet the deepest desires of our heart. We should have great expectations as Christians, and a living hope, but the reality will exceed our expectations. We have *“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you..”* (1 Peter 1:4) and we will come into that inheritance when we take our place, with our Lord Jesus Christ, and with all the saints from all the ages, in our new spiritual bodies, in the new heaven and earth that God will prepare for us. We have to allow the future to shape the present: *“The Christian, a person of faith, ..is precisely .. a person for whom God’s future shapes the present.”* (Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, 1999, *Hope against Hope*, Eerdmans, p. 83)

We cannot think too much about Heaven, but we usually think too little about it and the eternal perspective enables us to live properly here and now. C. S. Lewis put it well:

“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”

Jesus said we were to store up our treasure in heaven, not on earth, because investments in heaven do not lose their value, unlike those on earth. We need to become heavenly minded in order to be of earthly use!

By faith not scoffing

Peter wrote his second letter and this section to answer the scoffers and false teachers who were saying (v.3, 4) that Jesus hasn't come and isn't going to come; and everything is going on as it always has done and nothing will change. In answer Peter reminds them that God's timescale and ours are not the same. He reminds them that God has previously acted – in creation to create space and time from nothing and in judgement on sin at the flood. Creation and judgement are part and parcel of what God is and does. His 'slowness' is in fact patience and forbearance, a sign of His mercy not of His incompetence and inaction. The final judgement and the new creation are both certain and sure, but it is God who calls the shots and decides the timetable. We are living nearly another 2,000 years on from Peter, but that is only 2 days in God's sight! The resurrection of Jesus was the first fruit of the new creation and a foretaste of what is to come for us and for the universe. We live in the in-between times, between the first and second coming of Christ, and this means that we must live and walk by faith.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that understanding that God is the creator of all things is an act of faith not sight: *“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”* (Heb. 11:3) We must always remember that it is by faith that we know that the universe was created by God – we cannot prove it. In the same way, it is by faith that we believe that God will create a new heavens and earth, and will raise our bodies on the last day. It is an act of faith to believe that God is in charge of history and one day will bring history to an end. Science cannot predict the end of the world, even though it has its own predictions for the future, because just as God created the universe from nothing in the first place, so He will choose the time when He will create a new heavens and earth. I do not think this will be through increased volcanic activity or nuclear holocaust (although God could use both means), even though it will be by fire, but it will be through a sovereign act of God, intervening in the history of His universe and making a new beginning. He has done it once before at the creation of the world and he can do it again.

We are called to live in the hope and expectation of what God is going to do. We are to work while it is still day. We are to preach the gospel to all nations, because until that job is finished the Lord will not return. We are to trust God to bring to completion the work he has started in us. We are looking forward to a new heaven and new earth, a place of 'no mores' – no more sorrow, pain, death, suffering, and a place where God dwells in the midst of His people. Surely, that is something worth looking forward to and something to encourage us when the going gets tough?