

Paradise Regained

Heaven on Earth – Part VI

Revelation 22:1-5

Introduction

It has been a joy to receive a number of comments from people regarding our series on heaven. It has been especially encouraging to hear that young people are engaging in our study as well.

One mother sent an email to me last week about her nine-year-old son, Will. He had a 102-degree fever and had to stay home from church, so his father fixed their computer so that he and his mother could listen to our service live on the Internet. She wrote, “As you were describing what heaven would not include, you were listing things like ‘no more sorrow, no more pain,’” and my son, whose mind was a few steps ahead of you, said, ‘And no more homework!’ Well, he was right!”

A Sunday school teacher wrote to me a couple of weeks ago to tell of something that occurred in her class. She has been teaching her five-year-old class about heaven also, and what it takes to get there. She decided to test the class a few weeks ago, so she began by asking them, “If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all the money to the church, would that get me into heaven?”

All the children said, “No!”

She asked, “If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the church lawn, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?”

Again, the answer was a resounding, “No!”

She wrote, “I was starting to smile – they were getting it.”

She asked, “If I was kind to animals and gave candy to children, and loved my husband, is that what I’ve got to do to get into heaven?”

They all shouted, “No!”

She wrote that she was bursting with pride that they were learning so well, and then asked, “Well then, what do I have to do to get into heaven?”

One five-year-old boy shouted, “You gotta be dead!”

He is right – our kids are getting this stuff right too!

Today our study of heaven takes us to Revelation chapter 22 and the final descriptive phrases of heaven.

Heaven, as we have learned already, is a word for the eternal state which literally incorporates the newly created universe, the city of gold – the Father’s house – and a new earth. All of this will be ours to enjoy in the glorious presence of God forever.

The truth is that the more we study the texts of the eternal state and the descriptions we have been given, the greater the mystery seems to grow and the more questions there are that come to mind. Yet our curiosity and desire for heaven, the Father’s house, and this new world only grows with what little we have been given.

What kind of world is it?

It is a world that staggers our imagination and leads us to want to know more.

One British author from the 1800s wrote,

The man who is about to sail for New Zealand as a settler, is naturally anxious to know something about his future home, its climate, its employments, its inhabitants, its ways and its customs. It would be strange indeed to not desire information about your new abode. Now surely, since we [plan] to dwell forever in that heavenly country, we ought to seek all the knowledge we can about it and become acquainted with our eternal home.ⁱ

God evidently wants us to think about this. In fact, it seems like He wants to blow our minds and stagger our imaginations.

We have encountered a house that makes Mount Everest look like a small hillside; we have been given the colors of gemstones the size of freight trains and pearls the size of stadiums.

We have also been struck by the pageantry as the parade of nations takes place in the opening ceremony of heaven’s glory; we have had great difficulty imagining a city sparkling like a flawless diamond, reflecting and refracting the brilliant light coming from God Himself.

Gold is so commonplace that it is the most common element in the capital city of heaven.

This reminds me of the story of the man who arrived at the gate of heaven with a suitcase. The angels stationed at the gate said, “Sir, you can’t bring that in here.”

“Why not,” the man said as he strained at the handle on his suitcase. “I worked all my life for this and I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

The angels said, “Well, you’ll have to open it first.”

The man opened his suitcase and displayed for them that it was filled with solid gold bars.

The angels looked at each other, somewhat puzzled, but finally agreed, “Okay, you can go in.”

After the man left, one angel said to the other, “Imagine that, the man is intent on bringing in a suitcase full of pavement.”

John has informed us that the streets of heaven are made of gold. Keep that in mind as you are tempted to dedicate the best of your energy and service to the acquisition of something which in heaven will be nothing more than pavement – asphalt.

In Revelation chapter 22, John gives us several final snapshots of the eternal city.

As John moves us deeper into the Father’s house, we discover that it is a beautiful garden, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden.ⁱⁱ

Captions of Paradise Regained

Let us first simply read verses 1-5 of Revelation chapter 22.

Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb,

in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him;

they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.

And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the

Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

Do not miss this – the beginning of human history was a story of Paradise lost. The end of human history is a story of Paradise regained.

Human history began in a garden with a river flowing through it and a tree of life, and it will end in a garden with a river flowing through it and a tree of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, do not be mistaken – this is not some kind of circle. It is more like a spiral because the Paradise of Eden was only a fraction of what the Paradise of heaven will be like.

Paradise was lost because of sin, but a new and eternal Paradise has been won because of the Savior.

And what a Paradise! John has shown us a city with gemstone foundations, walls of jasper, gates of pearl, and streets of gold. He now takes us inside to show us water, trees, and fruit.

As we take a tour inside the new Paradise, we are going to focus on several snapshots from John’s vision. Several captions could be written underneath John’s photographic word pictures of heaven. Let us look at these.

1. The first caption would be, “The river of life is flowing forever.”

Look at verse 1 again. John is shown by his angelic guide . . .

. . . a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God . . .

John is struck by two things: the river’s color and its source.

He tells us that the river is as clear as “krystallos” (κρυσταλλος), which is a Greek word that is transliterated to give us our word “crystal”.

In other words, this mighty river is sparkling and shimmering with a brightness that seems to John to be like light refracting off crystal.

John also notes that the river originates with the throne of God.

In the Garden of Eden, a river flowed through; in the millennial kingdom, a river flowed from the temple mount, but in this eternal city, the river is literally flowing from the throne. This means that God is forever creating the river of the water of life.

David the Psalmist had predicted centuries earlier of a river whose streams would make glad the city of God (Psalm 46:4). The prophet Joel wrote that a

fountain would flow out of the house of God (Joel 3:18).

These are literal waters that are of a nature and quality that we have never seen before, just as we have never seen a literal city like this before.^{iv}

Perhaps you have sailed or stood at the banks of a great river – perhaps you have seen the mighty Mississippi, the Ganges, or maybe the Colorado. There is nothing quite like the sound of water rushing over rapids and certainly the sound of a waterfall as the river’s waters drop several feet in the air.

If my understanding of this pyramidal structure of the Father’s house is correct, with twelve levels or floors stretching eleven miles into the air with His throne at the very top, then this river would travel through miles of garden until it would drop as much as one mile to the next level. There it would course through greenery, flanked by trees, and then cascade in a massive thundering waterfall once again to the level below. All the while it would be flowing, shimmering, cascading, and sparkling as the lights of gems and gold reflect off its crystal waters. It will be spectacular.

God has created a place in which His beloved will be enraptured by the spectacular beauty and wonder of their new surroundings. People today travel for miles to see a national park or nature reserve, but in this Paradise, God’s people will be living in the midst of the most beautiful scenery imaginable.^v

John informs us as well that this river not only has literal properties, but symbolic meaning. This is the river of life – the river which symbolizes life.

In other words, this river flowing from the throne of God will symbolize eternal life that originates in the person of God and the promise delivered by God incarnate, Jesus Christ, to those who would drink of His gospel. They, by believing in Him, would be given the water of everlasting life and never thirst again (John 4).

2. The second caption would be, “The tree of life is flourishing forever.”

Not only is there a river of life flowing forever, but there is, secondly, a tree of life flourishing forever.

Notice verse 2 again.

... On either side of the river was the tree of life ...

Does this object sound familiar?

The tree of life appeared in the Garden of Eden, and from this tree Adam and Eve were barred lest they live forever in their sinful state (Genesis 3:24). God sent the cherubim – angelic creatures – with flaming swords to keep Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of life and gaining immortality in the midst of their sin.

There are no cherubim guarding the saints from eating here. In Revelation chapter 2 verse 7, the Bible promises the beloved that they will one day . . .

... eat from the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God [literally, the garden of God].

Now John uses a singular word that is translated “tree” in verse 2. Greek scholars take this as a collective singular, given the fact that John tells us in the same verse that they are located on both sides of the river. It is one species of tree lining the river of life as it winds its way through the Father’s House – the heavenly city of God.

We do not have a tree, we have what seems to be rows of trees on either side of the river in this magnificent garden of God.

And what an interesting tree! Notice that John describes it further in verse 2 as a kind of tree that bears twelve different kinds of fruit every single month. This is not just rows of trees, but an orchard. And the fruit is always ripe.

What kinds of fruit will there be? We do not know. It could be peaches, apples, dates, kiwi, mango, guava, figs, plums, pears, or bananas. There will be twelve kinds every month.

Greek scholars are unanimous in their understanding that this fruit could be twelve different kinds each month. Perhaps there are even twelve different fruits on each tree which could give the potential of 144 different kinds of fruit throughout the year.

We are going to have months, which imply years.

Henry Morris writes, “The fact that months are identified indicates that the orbital and rotational motions of the earth will go on [in the new creation] as God established them in the very beginning and that the moon likewise will continue orbiting around the earth.”^{vi}

Be that as it may, things will be remarkably different and unusual because at least these trees – perhaps only these trees which symbolize eternal life – will bear a crop of fresh fruit forever.

God has promised we will enjoy this fruit. This means we are going to have mouths to eat the fruit,

tongues and taste buds to savor the fruit, and I would hope teeth to chew the fruit. I do not want to have to use a juicer. I do not want strained peaches; I want to bite into a crisp apple.

John also tells us in verse 2 that the leaves of the tree of life are . . .

. . . for the healing of the nations.

The Greek word for “healing” is the word “therepeia” (θεραπεια), from which we get our English word “therapy”.

Why would the nations need healing if all evil and sin has been eliminated? John was not telling us that there would be illness in the new earth; he was actually emphasizing that this is the permanent condition of the beloved.^{vii}

The leaves of the tree symbolize the fact that in the kingdom of heaven, there is perpetual refreshment, food, water, and health. In fact, there is never-ending satisfaction.

C. S. Lewis put it well when he wrote that he had found within himself desires which no experience in this world could satisfy and the most probable explanation was that he was made for another world.

In this world is the river of life and the tree of life with healing in its leaves – literally therapy for the nations. This is a comprehensive concept that incorporates mental, emotional, spiritual and physical healing – the beloved will be healed forever!

Think of what that means emotionally – there will be no more scars, no more sorrow, no more haunting memories, dashed hopes, or dreams.

Think of what that means spiritually – no more failure, no more confusion, no more struggles with imperfections, no more battling with the flesh, the world, or the devil.

Think of what this means physically.

John informs us that the presence of this tree is God’s way of saying that there is no possibility of disease in the eternal state, of any kind.^{viii}

Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic, wrote of speaking to a class of mentally handicapped Christians. They thought it was great when she said she was going to get a new body. But when she added, “And you are going to get new minds,” they broke out into applause. They knew of their unique struggle; they knew of their limitations. Heaven offered for them unique healing.

Joni wrote further, “I still can hardly believe that I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees and no feeling from the shoulders

down, will one day have a new body – light, bright, clothed in righteousness, powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis. Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy literally promises new bodies, new hearts, [new emotions] and new minds. Only in the gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible [promise].^{ix}

Beloved, this tree will symbolize the fact that all the hurts of humanity have been forever healed!

The truth is, we have never known one moment in life like this.^x

The first breath we took in the delivery room, or back seat of the car if our dads did not drive fast enough, was followed with our very first, piercing cry. Since that time we have never experienced one moment of perfect peace, perfect health, perfect security, perfect freedom, perfect satisfaction, and certainly not perfect sinlessness.

However, we will experience this here, as Paradise is regained, and much more!

There is a crystal river flowing forever!

There is a forest of trees flourishing forever!

3. The third caption would be, “There is a curse finished forever.”

In verse 3 John reminds us again . . .

There will no longer be any curse . . .

How will this happen?

. . . the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him

The unity and equality of God the Father and God the Son is expressed in dramatic terms, for they occupy the same throne.

The place of primary authority, sovereignty, and dominion is jointly held together by the Father and the Son. They reign in perfect equality and unity with no competition.^{xi}

To the utter delight of the redeemed, the beloved, God delegates the right to rule to us as well.

It is interesting that of all the titles given to Jesus Christ, God the Son, the term used in this verse is, “the Lamb”.

It fits this context perfectly. The curse is gone in heaven. How? By virtue of Christ becoming a curse for us.

The curse in the Garden of Eden brought four things into being that had not existed before: sorrow, pain, toil, and death.

These are the very same things we are told will not exist in heaven. The reason is because the Lamb of God came to suffer all four.

- Christ was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief so that He could bear our grief and carry our sorrows (Isaiah 53:3-4);
- He sweated as He toiled for our redemption; sweated great drops of blood in agony over the curse He would become (Luke 22:44);
- He suffered the pain of crucifixion and even wore on the cross the symbol of that which came into the world because of the curse – a crown of thorns (John 19:2);
- He suffered not only the sorrow of tears and strong crying (Hebrews 5:7), but death; death, so that we could be given life (Romans 6:23).^{xii}

So we see the Lamb in this scene of great joy and glory for all of us, and at the same time we are reminded that we are there because He came here. The glory of heaven is ours because of the curse-shattering, curse-destroying work of Jesus Christ.

When I began preparing this sermon, the outline I had developed had the word “forgotten” instead of “finished”. I had originally intended to say, “The curse is forgotten forever.”

However, it occurred to me that John’s description is once again intended to remind us of the cross, which will remind us of the curse.

We will see the Lamb, slain on our behalf. Remember that Christ in His glorified body came to the disciples in the upper room after His resurrection and said to Thomas,

“... see My hands ... and ... My side ...”
(John 20:27)

In other words, “Inspect My wounds.” This informs us that Christ had chosen to retain the scars of His atoning work on the cross as our Passover Lamb.

So in all the glory of heaven, Jesus Christ is seen as the Lamb of God.

This sight will only increase our love for Him and our joy in His grace. We will never forget why we have gained entrance into heaven – ever!

The wounds of Christ will be eternal reminders that Christ became the curse for us (Galatians 3:13), so that He could abolish the curse; He could finish it off forever.

Because the curse is gone and we are like Christ, we will be able to view the glory of His presence.

John adds in verse 4,

they will see His face . . .

In other words, in our glorified state, John writes that we will see the face of God.

Since God is spirit, we are not told exactly what we will see. The Bible does not tell us if we will see physical expressions or forms of the Father, Son, or Spirit.

We will either see some form that God the Father chooses to show us, or we will simply be looking into the face of our glorified Savior Jesus Christ, who is the bright image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

We do know this – when Adam and Eve sinned, the curse fell and they ran and hid from God.

We, however, will run to God. We will experience greater, more intimate fellowship than the fellowship of God’s physical manifestation with Adam, or the partial glory of God’s back seen by Moses, or the brilliant light seen by the Apostle Paul. We will see Christ face to face in all His glory!

Charles Spurgeon, preaching on this text, said, “Seeing Christ face to face implies five things:

- certain salvation [from Him];
- clear knowledge of Him;
- conscious favor [with Him];
- close fellowship [beside Him];
- complete transformation [to be like Him].^{»xiii}

The curse of Eden is overturned; it is finished forever. There will be no more thorns, thistles, floods, fires, sorrow, pain, sin, separation, grief, guilt or death.

“And no more homework!” Young Will is right.

Notice that John writes next in verse 4,

. . . His name will be on their foreheads.

This might be some form of marking on the beloved, just as the antichrist tried to imitate God’s authority by marking his followers on their hand or forehead.

It might also be an inscription on a regal crown that sits upon our heads as we co-reign with the beloved.

The crown or turban that Aaron wore as the high priest had a golden plate that covered his forehead.^{xiv}

The name of God on our forehead implies:

- ownership – we belong to Him;
- service – we will represent Him as we serve;
- royalty – we will reign with Him as co-regents in the eternal state forever.

Keep this in mind – your future eternal life is glorious and meaningful. God wanted you to live today with a perspective of *that* day.

So:

- No matter how painful life is for you now – it is not forever.
- No matter how difficult your disability is – it is not forever.
- No matter how fresh your sorrow is – it is not forever.
- No matter how great your struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil is – it is not forever.

There is:

- a sparkling river flowing forever from the throne of God;
- a forest of trees that will flourish with fruit forever;
- a curse and all that it represents that will be finished forever, and all that will remain of it are the visible scars our Savior has chosen to bear forever.

The only scars in heaven will be His.

Because of our Savior, our joy, excitement, discovery, anticipation, gratitude, praise, song, service, fellowship, and royal reign with Him will last forever.

Now, just how long is forever?

Imagine the earth turning into a solid steel ball – all the way around the crust of the earth (some 25,000 miles in circumference) and all the way to its inner core. And imagine one little sparrow is released to land on the planet where he proceeds to sharpen his beak, only to be taken away.

However, a million years later, the sparrow is released again and he sharpens his little beak on this planet of solid steel.

It happens again a third time. Three hundred million years have gone by and this sparrow has sharpened his beak three times.

Every million years, this sparrow is back again, and again, and again.

By the time this little sparrow sharpens his beak enough times to wear down this planet of steel to the size of a BB, forever will have just begun.

Paradise regained will have just been introduced, and our lives in the presence and fellowship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, along with all the redeemed and all the angelic hosts of heaven, will have just begun. And it will go on forever!

ⁱ J. C. Ryle, quoted by Randy Alcorn in Heaven (Tyndale, 2004), p. 5.

ⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Victorious: Revelation (Victor Books, 1987), p. 151.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 254.

^{iv} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 482.

^v Custer, p. 254.

^{vi} Henry M. Morris, The Revelation Record (Tyndale, 1986), p. 466.

^{vii} Life Application Bible: Revelation (Tyndale House, 2000), p. 268.

^{viii} Thomas, p. 485.

^{ix} Alcorn, p. 286.

^x Stephen J. Lawson, Heaven Help Us! (Navpress, 1995), p. 160.

^{xi} Lawson, p. 160.

^{xii} Morris, p. 440.

^{xiii} Custer, p. 256.

^{xiv} Morris, p. 469.