

CHAPTER 21

"Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:1,2)

It would further seem that after the great advance marked by the millennial Age, and after the great judgment of individuals which follows it (Rev. xx. 11-15), there will succeed an Age as much better than the millennial as the millennial will be better than is this of ours to-day. To that post-millennial Age belong the last two chapters of *Revelation*: in it our Lord reigns as visible Monarch of the world, and the New Jerusalem takes the place of the millennial Jerusalem: even then the "nations" still need to be "healed" by "the leaves of the Tree of Life," although death shall be no more among them. Not even in that post-millennial Age are we at the goal: for beyond that far vista of the progress of the race, there is due an Age when our Lord "shall hand over the Kingdom to God, even to The Father" (1 Cor. xv. 24).¹

In chapter 21 John receives a most glorious vision--a new earth, new heavens, and a heavenly Jerusalem.

The contrasts are very marked between the millennial and the new earth. In the millennial earth there will be the possibility of disobedience (Zech. xiv. 17), and consequent plague (Zech. xiv. 18); there will also be death (Isaiah lxx. 20), that last enemy not being destroyed till the close of Christ's millennial reign--and not death only, but destructive judgment, as is seen when fire comes down from Heaven to devour those who apostatise at the close of the millennium. None of these things can occur in that new creation of which it is said, "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things have passed away." Rev. xxi. 4.²

But before discussing this subject, I would like to take a look first at the phrase, "*And there was no more sea.*" I've always wondered what that meant. Surely it couldn't mean that there would no longer be oceans of any kind! William Newton, commenting on Daniel 7, provides an answer:

But they were seen to "arise out of the sea." And, before they rose, the four winds of heaven strove upon the sea. The sea, therefore, is a symbol of nations; or masses of people. And, as winds rush over it, and lash it into fury; so, masses of people are agitated and tossed about, by what we may, well enough, term the stormy winds of excitement and passions. *Out of the sea*, the beasts arose; i.e., from the midst of such a state of popular tumult, these four kings, successively, rose to power. . . .

We have, then, the exact meaning of this term, whenever used in its prophetic

1 G. H. Trench, *A Study of St John's Gospel*, pg. 200.

2 B. W. Newton, *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, pg. 367.

sense. When, therefore, our Lord tells us, that just before his second coming, there shall be "distress of nations, with perplexity; *the sea and the waves roaring*;" we see, precisely, what is meant. It is not the literal, but the *prophetic*, sea of which He is speaking. There shall then be a fearfully excited and tempestuous state of the nations of the earth. The mass of the nations will be lashed into fury by the stormy winds of popular commotion. Revolution shall pull down thrones, and undermine governments. Passions shall shake them. Fear and dread will take hold upon them. . . .

So, too, when of the times of the Messiah, it is announced, that "the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; *and there was no more sea*;" the meaning is equally plain. It is a prophetic declaration. There shall be, no more, a troubled and stormy state of the nations. No more the breaking forth of the winds of passion. Violence and destruction shall be heard no more. All shall be peace, in the perfect reign of the Prince of Peace.³

Now concerning the New Jerusalem, is it a millennial city or a city that descends after the millennium?

I do not see how it can be a millennial city, for we read in Ezekiel chapters 40-48 of a millennial temple built in Jerusalem. Since the New Jerusalem has no temple, it would appear this city must be the Jerusalem of the eternal kingdom. These first 5 verses of chapter 21 have posed a problem for scholars. If chapter 20 describes the millennium, and 21:9-22:5 also describes the millennium, then why is there placed inbetween them these 5 verses describing the eternal state? As one can see, it obviously disrupts the chronology.

By some interpreters, the New Jerusalem of chapter 21 has been assigned to the Millennial Kingdom of chapter 20. But this view must be rejected for various good reasons: First, it would seriously violate the literary order of the book, by reverting to a description of the Millennium after what is admittedly an account of the last Judgment in 20:11-15, which follows the Millennial Kingdom. Second, in the new condition described by chapter 21 there is neither sin nor death, but in the Millennium both are present. Third, in the language of 20:1-22:5 there is a constantly recurring note of eternal *finality* which would be entirely inappropriate for the Millennial Kingdom which is transitional in character--"a thousand years" in length.⁴

Johnson provides some additional insight, and a possible solution to this enigma:

A group of expositors of varying theological thought (Beasley-Murray, R. H. Charles, Ford, A. C. Gaebelein, Kelly, Zahn) believe that 21:9-22:5, 14-15 belong with 20:1-10 as a further description of the millennial reign, whereas 21:1-5 refers to the eternal state, which follows the final judgment of the dead. . . .

Admittedly, this is a possible solution that has the advantage of giving more

3 William Newton, *Lectures on the First Two Visions of the Book of Daniel*, pp. 48-49.

4 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pg. 507.

descriptive content to the millennial reign. This approach, however, suffers from two serious criticisms. First, though it rightly assigns 21:1-5 to the postmillennial New Jerusalem in the context of the new heaven and earth, it arbitrarily assigns 21:9ff. to the millennial New Jerusalem without the slightest hint from the text that this is a recapitulation of 20:1-10. Thus, there is an eternal state New Jerusalem followed immediately by a millennial New Jerusalem, both bearing the same title. This is hardly plausible. Second, this view strongly argues for historical progression in 19:11-21:5; Parousia--defeat of Antichrist--binding of Satan--first resurrection--Millennium--release of Satan--last judgment--new heavens and earth--and then argues for recapitulation in 21:9ff.

It seems best, therefore, despite some problems, to regard the sequence begun at 19:11 as running chronologically through 22:6, thus placing all the material in 21:1ff. after the Millennium. At this point, a suggestion might be offered for further study. If the Millennium is a true eschatological, historical event like the person, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus, may not 21:1ff. be viewed as the full manifestation of the kingdom of God, a partial manifestation of which will be realized in the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints, during which Christ will defeat all this enemies, including death (1 Cor 15:23-28)? Some of the same conditions described in 21:1ff. would then, at least in part, characterize the Millennium.⁵

With no sure reconciliation on hand for the moment, let us continue by asking, Who will dwell in this New Jerusalem? We are not definitely told here in Revelation 21, but we are told who will be free to enter. *"And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life" (24-27).*

A problem now arises: If this is not the millennial city but one that descends after the millennium, then there would not be anyone alive who could defile it, since only the saved will be there.

Perhaps there is some merit to Frost's view, that there are two distinct visions in this chapter--the first of the "new Jerusalem" and the second of the "holy Jerusalem," also called the "holy city." He states, "the first vision is of the city in its unending state, as the abiding place of the redeemed for all eternity; and the second vision is of the same city in its millennial state, as the abiding place of the redeemed for the one thousand years."⁶

When Frost says "in its unending state," it brings to mind a comment I read by Richard Simonds:

"And may it not sometimes be a help to our devotion, and our faith, if we picture, in our minds, the glories of heaven as fitted to give delight to all the faculties of the redeemed, to the pure and holy instincts of souls and bodies, dwelling in the

⁵ Johnson, *Revelation*, pp. 580-581.

⁶ Frost, *Matthew Twenty-Four and the Revelation*, pg. 302.

very presence of their Creator, and made like the gracious Redeemer Himself? It is, at least, very desirable that our thoughts of the heavenly world, and the heavenly life, should not be so undefined, shadowy, mystical, as to leave upon the mind chiefly an impression of vagueness, almost of unreality."⁷

I must admit that my initial impression of this text in Revelation has been that of a New Jerusalem created one day and descending to earth the very next. But after reading the sermon by Simonds, it prompted in my mind the thought that, just maybe, the New Jerusalem has been in existence all along, the home *now* of saints long departed (compare Gal. 4:26 and Heb. 12:22). It is only its revealing that is brought forth--descending from its present abode in the heavens to earth--and thus encouraging us here on earth with what we may look forward to. In any event, I shall no longer picture heaven in my mind as some foggy place with mysterious souls floating about. It is truly a beautiful and magnificent abode.

Moving on, we notice that those who shall enter are the saved of the nations--Gentile believers. Benjamin Douglass has some interesting thoughts here:

"With this new heaven and new earth, and new Jerusalem, and all things new, and all old things gone, forever, we have at last *the kingdom of God* come: that kingdom for which we are commanded to pray, "Thy kingdom come." A preliminary reign of king Jesus is had for one thousand years, for he must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet. This he will not fully and finally accomplish, as has been seen, till the millennium is ended, the first Adam's world burned up, and the new heavens and new earth are come.

There are, of course, many millions, probably hundreds, perhaps thousands of millions, of individuals among the nations on the millennial earth who did not participate in the rebellion which Satan had incited and taken the lead of on his coming up out of the abyss; and they are found on the new earth, miraculously preserved; and are "cleansed" from the taint of their connection with the first Adam. THEY will beget children, under these new conditions, and the race will go on multiplying, on the new earth, with the blessing of God resting upon the multiplication thereof, which will of necessity be prodigious, so that it will fill, probably, not only this world but all the worlds, in time, that are to be created and given to the second Adam! This endless multiplication of the race is what the prophet Isaiah alludes to when predicting the grand results to follow the vicarious work of Jesus.

As a part of Christ's reward, he foretells, Isa. 53:10, that the Christ "shall see a seed" which shall "prolong its days." He asserts that this shall be "the pleasure of the Lord," this prolongation, that is, this *endless multiplication* of the race, and that it shall prosper, in his hands, under his federal headship, when it is actually assumed.

At Isa. 45:18, the Lord says that he did not make the earth in vain, he formed it to be inhabited. If that was his plan in forming the earth originally, how much more

7 *Sermons by Rev. Richard Simonds, A Memorial Volume* published by his family, 1899.

natural it should be his plan when the new earth takes the place of this, and the people are all righteous! Will he not then say as of old, "Be fruitful and multiply?"

It is a necessity of the case. There is a needs be, if God would recover and get back and give to Christ that DOMINION, in its entirety, which was lost in the first Adam.

While there are many Old Testament passages referring to this, there is but one New Testament proof of it, and there it comes in incidentally. Paul, in his doxology, at the close of the third chapter of Ephesians, says: "Unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the GENERATIONS of the age of ages." There is then to be an age of ages and generations of men, of course, throughout it. At Gen. 9:12, God speaks of "perpetual generations;" and frequently he speaks of "all generations," "generation to generation," "many generations." These are superlative forms which imply generations without end. At Ps. 22:31, after declaring that the kingdom is to be the Lord's and that a seed shall then serve him and shall be accounted to the Lord for the generation, the psalmist adds: "They shall come and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that *shall be* born." Which I take to mean that the people of one generation shall declare to the people of after generations and so on indefinitely, after the kingdom has become the Lord's.⁸

For us, what an honor and privilege it will be to freely enter such a glorious city, the residence of the King! What about the Jews? Shall they, perhaps, dwell as permanent residents within the New Jerusalem? In Exodus 4:22 Yahweh says, "*Israel is My son, My firstborn.*" As the firstborn son, Israel receives a double inheritance.

In John 14:2-3, Jesus told the disciples that he would prepare a place for them. "*In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if [because] I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.*" Speaking as Gentiles, we must be wary of appropriating all of Jesus' promises to ourselves. These verses were spoken to his disciples at the same time as verses 13-14, where they were promised: "*And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*" Who, other than the disciples, could claim such power in prayer?

Out of all the nations, Yahweh chose Israel. His promise to David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7:10 states: "*Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more.*" This promise will be fulfilled during the millennium when Israel takes her rightful place in the land of promise, the land of Palestine. At that time they will worship Christ in the millennial temple, built according to the instructions given to Ezekiel. At the millennium's end, the earthly temple will be destroyed in the renovation and regeneration of the earth. Then in the eternal kingdom to follow, Israel will worship Christ in the New Jerusalem, where the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

All of chapter 21 seems to me to have special significance for Israel. The twelve gates have the

8 Benjamin Douglass, *Four Lectures on the Revelation* (1866), pp. 36-37.

names of the twelve tribes; the twelve foundations have the names of the twelve Apostles, who according to Matthew 19:28 will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel; the fact that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem would not be of significance to the Gentiles, but it would hold great significance for Israel. Israel is special to God. We read in Zechariah 2:8,9:

For thus says Yahweh of hosts: "He sent Me after glory, to nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. For surely I will shake My hand against them, and they shall become spoil for their servants. Then you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me."

John is given a wonderful vision of the New Jerusalem as it descends to earth, and we all shall enjoy its beauty for an eternity. According to Seiss, it is a city whose base is close to 1500 miles square. It rises 1500 miles into the heavens, never descending all the way to the earth but elevated some distance above it.⁹ Streets made of translucent gold extend outward and upward as far as the eye can see. Precious stones are seen everywhere, and one enters through one of twelve gates, each made of a single pearl. The city has no need of the sun or moon for its light, for the glory of God illuminates it-- "*The Lamb is its light.*" Eternity shall be a time when all God's people--Jew and Gentile--abide in loving harmony with the never-ending desire to praise the Lamb who bought them with his own blood.

Before closing this chapter, let us take a minute to address two questions relating to the new earth. First, will we be living on the new earth or in some celestial heaven? We turn to Hoekema for help.

The doctrine of the new earth, as taught in Scripture, is an important one. It is important, first, for the proper understanding of the life to come. One gets the impression from certain hymns that glorified believers will spend eternity in some ethereal heaven somewhere off in space, far away from earth. The following lines from the hymn "My Jesus, I Love Thee" seem to convey that impression: "In mansions of glory and endless delight / I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright." But does such a conception do justice to biblical eschatology? Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, and flitting from cloud to cloud while doing so? On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God. Since God will make the new earth his dwelling place, and since where God dwells there heaven is, we shall then continue to be in heaven while we are on the new earth.¹⁰

Second, is the earth as we now know it completely destroyed and a new one created, or does this earth undergo a renovation of staggering proportions so as to bring it back to its original perfection?

⁹ Seiss, *Lectures*, pp. 404-409. John Gill takes the view that the city descends all the way to earth. See his *Body of Divinity*, pp. 636-637.

¹⁰ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pg. 274.

We turn first to McClain:

The dimensions of the New Jerusalem are admittedly gigantic--"twelve thousand furlongs" in breadth, and length, and height (vs. 16). . . . What a sight such a city would be, gradually rising toward the sky by the great step-backs of its twelve-jeweled foundations. It is true that this concept would be totally out of proportion with the dimensions of our present earth. But there is to be a "new earth." And if the earth is to be made the eternal dwelling place of Christ and His redeemed people, as the passage suggests, then the earth will become the center of all things. Surely there would be a divine fitness in this, for here the great drama of sin and redemption will have been played out before an awed universe. And in that case, doubtless, the new earth will be so constituted, both as to size and glory, that it will harmonize perfectly with its eternal city.¹¹

This answer of McClain was not as specific as that of Hoekema:

We must, however, reject the concept of total annihilation in favor of the concept of renewal, for the following four reasons:

First, both in II Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1 the Greek word used to designate the newness of the new cosmos is not *neos* but *kainos*. The word *neos* means new in time or origin, whereas the word *kainos* means new in nature or in quality . . .

A second reason . . . is Paul's argumentation in Romans 8. When he tells us that the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God so that it may be set free from its bondage to decay (vv. 20-21), he is saying that it is the present creation that will be liberated from corruption in the eschaton . . .

A third reason is the analogy between the new earth and the resurrection bodies of believers. Previously we pointed out that there will be both continuity and discontinuity between the present body and the resurrection body. . . . By way of analogy, we would expect that the new earth will not be totally different from the present earth but will be the present earth wondrously renewed.

A fourth reason . . . is this: If God would have to annihilate the present cosmos, Satan would have won a great victory. For then Satan would have succeeded in so devastatingly corrupting the present cosmos and the present earth that God could do nothing with it but to blot it totally out of existence.¹²

Harkness has some interesting thoughts on the 2nd Peter passage:

Though this passage may seemingly teach the destruction or annihilation of the earth, yet it does not in verity teach this gloomy doctrine, but the very reverse. The expression "burnt up," has led some to suppose and believe, that this earth

11 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pg. 512.

12 Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pp. 280-281.

will be utterly consumed, destroyed, or annihilated by fire or burning. The language here used, "burnt up," seems to involve such an idea. It seems to imply utterly consumed, but the Greek word does not convey this idea. It is compounded of the verb $\kappa\alpha\iota\omega$ to burn, and the preposition $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha$, which signifies down, down upon, from above. The literal translation then of this word is not "burnt up" but burnt down upon, burnt from above. The passage would then read thus, "the earth and the works that are therein shall be burnt from above." That is to say, the fire will be kindled upon the earth from above. The atmosphere, after God Almighty has produced certain changes upon it, which it is not necessary here to explain, will be set on fire first, and the burning atmosphere will set fire to the earth and the works that are thereon. As the atmosphere is everywhere above the earth, and as that has to set fire to the earth, the earth will be burnt down upon, or burnt from above.

This then contains nothing of the idea of burning to destruction, of burning to annihilation. It teaches the doctrine that the earth shall be subjected to the action of fire, but it also teaches that the result of that action will not be the utter consuming of this earth from among the works of God; its utter extinction from the things which declare his eternal power and Godhead. This Peter proves by unanswerable argument. When the Old world was overflowed with water and perished, the earth was not reduced to nonentity--the earth continued to exist. If then the water did not annihilate the earth . . . neither will the fire or burning which awaits it. This is Peter's very argument. As the earth survived the action of the water, so will it survive the action of the fire; and consequently despite of this burning, which will produce great, and important, and glorious changes upon it, he says, "nevertheless we, according to his promise," that is the promise of God uttered by Isaiah, "look for a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."¹³

But exactly when shall these changes take place? Before the millennium or after? Culver states, "Most readers will be acquainted with the fact that the majority of modern Premillennialists have identified (or at least synchronized) this conflagration with the judgment of the great white throne described in Revelation 20."¹⁴ However, Culver himself holds to the opposite view; that as to the *time*, it takes place "at the beginning of the Millennium, and that in *nature* and *extent* the conflagration which introduces the new heavens and new earth shall consist of a strictly limited renovation rather than annihilation of the existing natural order."¹⁵

Buck also believes that the new earth will take place before the millennium:

In the last chapter of Isaiah, the creation of the new heavens and new earth is represented very plainly as belonging to the period of Israel's sudden restoration and conversion to the Lord; and it is also described in inseparable connection with the coming of the Lord to judgment at the time that "all nations" shall be gathered together against Israel, so that "all the tribes of the earth" may see the glory of the

13 Harkness, *Messiah's Throne and Kingdom*, pp. 116-118.

14 Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days*, pg. 178.

15 Ibid. (Note: you can find *Daniel and the Latter Days* on our web site by going to Classic Commentaries.)

Lord's judgment-coming, when he appears in flaming fire to deliver his people, and destroy their foes. The battle of Gog and Magog, as it is described in Ezekiel, and in Joel, will be terminated in that manner.

The astonishing suddenness of Israel's conversion is strikingly illustrated in verses 7, 8; and God claims to do the work himself, verse 9; verses 10, 11, 12, and 13, show how it is to be applied to the religious and national capital of the Jews, for which they had mourned, verse 10. Verse 14 tells how they would be affected when they should see it accomplished. . . . Then follows the way in which it shall be done, clearly identifying it with the second advent in glory, in the sight of all men, at the time that all nations are gathered before him, when Jerusalem shall be finally delivered, and the Jews restored forever. And the fire that consumes the wicked will renovate the earth and heavens.¹⁶

I would add only one observation. Would not the earth be in a deplorable condition after all the seal, trumpet, and vial judgments? Imagine all the dead bodies besides. It scarcely seems reasonable that the beginning of the millennium should be taken up with the enormous task of making the earth a fit place for our Saviour to reign.

¹⁶ Buck, *Harmony and Exposition*, pg. 356.