

HEAVEN – Part Eight
“What Did John See?” #5
Sermon – May 5, 2019

We have just celebrated Easter and Jesus’ triumph over the grave. As we celebrated we acknowledged that not only did Jesus conquer death but He has made provision for us to conquer death as well. Death could not hold Jesus in the grave and death will not hold us there either. Because of the resurrection of Christ we too will leave our grave behind and ascend into heaven to be with Christ forever. But between now and the second coming of Christ things will be deteriorating on the earth. Peter tells us what will happen.

PETER 3:3-13

“Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation’. For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

“But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

“Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat. But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation.”

Knowing what lies ahead, Peter is admonishing us to live our lives in righteousness until the day of His appearing. That is why for several weeks prior to Easter we spoke of the hope of heaven which all believers anticipate, looking at the events that will occur prior to and after His Second Coming to earth. We took a detailed look at the six main events that will occur in the end-times: The Rapture, the Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Millennium, and the Great White Throne Judgment. The last time we talked of these events we looked at what was occurring on the earth during the tribulation. We went into this in some detail at that time so I will not repeat myself. Suffice it to say that the earth has suffered a series of cataclysmic events which has greatly affected the earth and its inhabitants.

We switch now from what was happening on the earth to what is about to happen – the Second Coming of Christ. What I want us to realize today is that when Jesus returns to the earth to reign as King, the earth He returns to is not the earth He or we have left behind at the Rapture. Jesus will rule over an earth that has been devastated by the wrath of His Father. Rivers, trees, mountains, oceans, nations, people, even the stars of heaven have suffered from the wrath of God being poured out on the earth and its inhabitants.

It is a world in which much has been destroyed by fire, flood, plague, and earthquake. Vegetation has been destroyed, crops have been ruined, water has been polluted, aquatic life, both fresh and sea water, has been decimated; The cities of the nations have fallen, the sun has increased in intensity, islands and mountains have disappeared, hailstones have dug great craters into the earth, and a third of the sun, moon and stars were struck so that only a third of both the daylight and the darkness remain.

Yet we are told that Jesus establishes Himself as King over this same earth for a thousand years. During this time does Jesus restore and renew the devastated earth? Since Colossians states that *“All things were created through Him and for Him”* (Colossians 1:16), does Jesus bring back beauty out of the remaining ashes of the earth while he resides there? Or does He allow the effects on mankind’s rebellion against Him to remain as a startling reminder of what rebellion costs?

We don’t really know. Other than the establishment of His reign on earth, the Bible does not tell us what Jesus is doing during the Millennium. We can make some assumptions based on what He did when He first walked the earth. But Scripture makes no mention of what He is actually doing to or for the earth while He reigns; neither does it tell us what the saints and angels who came out of heaven with Him are doing. It simply says the believers will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. Yet these few descriptive words give us some clues as to what may generally occur.

To be a priest is to represent the people before God. To reign is to rule over groups of people. Since we know that Christ Himself is our High Priest He will continue to represent all believers before the throne of God no matter what His current location is. Since He is also the King of kings and Lord of lords, He will continue to rule in great power over all who live on the earth, as well as those who dwell in the heavenly places.

As believers and priests ourselves, we then should also expect to bring the petitions of the people to God and to provide advice and direction as to who God is and what He wants them to do. Likewise as those who reign with Christ we should also expect to rule over some portion of the earth’s remaining population during the millennial kingdom.

Other than these few mentions in Scripture it is unknown what we may be doing as we live as priests of God and Christ and reign with Him for a thousand years. Scripture does not give us details about life on this earth while Christ reigns. But it does tell us how the reign of Christ on this present earth ends. It ends with one last rebellion of Satan who gathers the nations of the earth together for one last attempt to usurp the authority of Christ over them.

REVELATION 20:7-10

“When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

After the rebellion is stamped out and the devil is thrown into the lake of fire John describes the final judgment occurring at the Great White Throne of God. It is here where non-believers are judged according to the things written in books which contain a complete list of their deeds while on earth. They are also judged by what was written in the book of life. If their name was not found to be written in the book of life they were thrown into the lake of fire. Death and Hades was also thrown into the lake of fire.

Once judgment is completed and punishment is handed out, Scripture says that there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

REVELATION 21:1

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away.”

Finally we see something new happening. Destruction has ended and the restoration and creation of something new has begun. The first heaven and the first earth have passed away and a new heaven and a new earth have been created. There is something very interesting about this simple Scripture. Notice that it does not say new heavens (plural) but a new heaven (singular) have passed away. Not that the heavens above us (stars, etc.) have not also “passed away” for revelation tells us they fall from heaven and are rolled up like a scroll (Revelation 6:14) they too suffer from God’s wrath. But this verse does not use the plural form but rather the singular form of the word Heaven.

This indicates that the Heaven that has been in existence, the one to which we as believers will be raptured to, is going to pass away. And the earth that we currently reside on will also pass away. But what does it mean when it says “pass away”? We use the term “passed away” when we speak of someone who has died. Now all people die, including believers, but after death believers are also resurrected to a new life; and when they are resurrected they do not inhabit the same body which they had on earth. Instead they receive a new body which Scripture calls a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:44). This spiritual body is free of sin but it is still a body. And, as we have seen previously, we will be recognizable even while inhabiting our new spiritual bodies.

It may work the same way for the earth. Though the old earth will pass away and a new earth will take its place, the new earth will most likely have similar characteristics to the old earth. Will we recognize it as earth? Will there be mountains and rivers, hills and plains, deserts and pastures like we have today? Will there still be a Yosemite to visit and a Mt. Everest to climb? We don’t know. But the fact that He still calls it earth gives us a hint about what it will be like. It will most likely be very similar to what we currently inhabit, but vastly improved. Let’s look at another example from Scripture of what it means to pass away.

REVELATION 21:4

“There will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

This use of the words “passed away” in this verse may help to clarify what is meant by the former verse. For the first earth to “pass away” may not mean that the entire earth will be completely obliterated, but may instead indicate that it will be cleansed, purified by fire as Peter says, which will cause the impurities and effects of sin to “pass away”, thus creating a new earth.

So mankind may once again live on the earth but it will be a different earth because the first earth with its sin saturated atmosphere will have passed away. And the things which sin wrought in us while we dwelt on the first earth will likewise pass away. When mankind takes up residence on the new earth we will live in resurrected bodies on a resurrected planet, never again to experience mourning, crying, or pain because they will have all passed away.

So what we can expect to occur on the new earth is that it will not contain any sin or the effects of sin. Like we, who were once sinners trapped in a body of sin but were raised to new life in Christ, so too

the earth will, at the very least, have the effects of sin upon it removed. This is confirmed by the words of Paul in his epistle to the Romans.

ROMANS 8:19-23

“For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.”

Just as believers will shed this body of corruptible flesh for a new and incorruptible body - free from sin, so too will this current earth shed its corrupted self as God replaces it with a newly created earth - free from the effects of sin. But why create a new earth? Why not just be done with it and create something brand new, something which God in His infinite wisdom could create with a flip of His fingers or with a spoken word? Psalm 115 tells us why.

PSALM 115:16

“The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the sons of men.”

God made the earth for the sons of men. In the beginning He planted a garden and placed man in the midst of it. God’s purpose for mankind has always been for us to dwell on the earth which He created for us. But our descent into sin ruined the earth. Just as God desires to give mankind a new birth, He also desires to give the earth a new birth.

It would appear then, that even though we are destined to dwell in Heaven after our death and resurrection the existing heaven is not our ultimate or final destination - the new earth is. I will get more into this later when we talk about the new Heaven.

But before we move on I want to mention a few things. There is one thing which I have found fascinating about the creation of the new earth and the doing away with the old. My point in mentioning this is because I believe it may be connected (or be relevant) as to why God allows the old earth to pass away and replaces it with a new one.

Besides the obvious, there are two specific places in Scripture where God connects the earth with our sin. In the Old Testament Joshua speaks to the people of Israel who have already entered the Promised Land and admonishes them to follow the Lord. It is in this same passage that God asks the people to choose whom they would serve, the gods of the land in which they are in or the God their fathers served, the same God which led them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. They people responded, *“We will serve the Lord, for He is our God”* (Joshua 24:18).

Based on nearly 70 years of experience with this group of rebellious people, Joshua is skeptical of their ability to remain faithful. So he challenges them twice more to commit to serve the Lord and both times they reply, *“We will serve the Lord.”* After hearing their promise Joshua took a large stone and set it up under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord and said to all the people,

JOSHUA 24:26-27

“Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for this stone heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny our God.”

It was not unusual for memorial stones to be made as a reminder to the Israelite people of their commitment to the Lord. Joshua set up a memorial stone earlier when they had crossed the Jordan River prior to defeating Jericho. And prior to returning to their homes (Joshua 21:24) on the east side of the Jordan River, the eastern tribes piled up stones like an altar as a memorial so the Israelites on the west side of the Jordan would remember they too followed the Lord their God.

What is unusual about this particular incident is that, unlike the other two instances, this stone is not called a memorial; it is called a “witness” because Joshua says the rock itself heard everything the Lord had instructed the Israelites to do. As a result it could act as a witness against them if they disobeyed what the rock had heard. For a rock to have ears to hear and a voice to speak is of course unheard of; yet Jesus Himself, as He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, said that if the people were silent upon His entry into Jerusalem *“the stones will cry out”* (Luke 19:40). Would they really have cried out? I do not doubt the word of the Lord when He says the rocks would cry out. Besides, if Balaam’s donkey was given the power to speak to his master (Numbers 22:28), then rocks could also be given the ability to cry out.

I am not here to prove that stones have ears or voices. Many have interpreted rocks crying out and a stone hearing the words of Joshua as figurative language and not reality. But I would argue that the waves and the wind do not have ears to hear either, and yet they obeyed the voice of the Lord when He told them to be still (Matthew 8:23-27). So it seems that inanimate objects can hear and respond, at least to the voice of the Lord, in ways which we cannot comprehend. Let’s move now to the second place in Scripture where God connects the earth with our sin. This is also found in the Old Testament.

MICAH 7:19

“He will have compassion of us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

Once again we could look at this as figurative language but there is another place in scripture which mentions the sea which may have bearing on this passage. When the apostle John writes about the new earth he says there will no longer be any sea.

REVELATION 21:1

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.”

The Greek word for “sea” can refer to the oceans in general which would include the five oceans of the world – the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, and Southern (or Antarctic) Oceans. It could also refer to specific seas such as the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Caspian Sea, the South China Sea, the Caribbean Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Black Sea. All of these are connected to the oceans of the world; but some, like the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, are surrounded by land and are more like a large lake.

Scholars disagree on whether or not there will be any type of sea on the new earth. Though Scripture seems to be pretty specific about there being no sea on the new earth I am not here to argue that point. What I want to point out is this. Like the rock that could act as a witness against the Israelites, the sea is where Scripture says God casts all our sins. If the existing earth contains witnesses that could condemn us and sins that we have committed, then it makes sense that God would destroy these witnesses against us and the sins which have been cast into the sea.

Even if these are only illustrations of what God has done and what God has heard, in His mercy provided through the shed blood of Christ, God is going to eliminate any condemnation and past sins which the earth may contain and allow us to start our new life with Him on an earth no longer stained

with sin and condemnation. Just as the accuser of the brethren will be thrown into the lake of fire, so too the earthly witnesses against us and the sins which we have committed will be destroyed when the existing earth is replaced by a new earth, free from sin and its consequences. Whether these particular passages have any bearing on why the old earth passes away can be debated. But one thing is certain. The first earth will pass away and a new earth will come into existence once the God ordained events on this existing earth are completed.

But what about the creation of a new heaven; why is that necessary? Unlike the first earth the first Heaven is not corrupted. So why does there need to be a second Heaven? We will have to postpone the answer to that question for another day; but I do want to end with the assurance that where believers we go after death is the place where Christ is currently seated at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20). This truth is firmly established. But this is not the same place in which we will live for eternity.

It is true that after death we will always be with Christ, but the Scriptures tell us that Christ will be residing in different locations. He is currently in the first Heaven but will soon descend to an earth suffering from the wrath of God in order to reign for a thousand years. We will be with Him in the first Heaven after our death or rapture, but we will also leave Heaven and descend with Him to the first earth, reigning with Him for a thousand years.

Because it appears that Christ returns to the first Heaven after his thousand year reign, we will also ascend back to the first heaven to witness the judgment occurring at the Great white Throne and possibly to receive our rewards somewhere between the end of the millennium and the casting of Satan into the lake of fire (Revelation 21:11-15). We then return to earth with Christ, not to the earth we left behind but rather to the second earth, for the first earth would have passed away by then.

This concept of a new Heaven and a new earth may cause some of us to rethink our concept of where we will live after death and what these places are like. Don't let your hearts be troubled. I will put your mind to rest next time we talk and make it clearer where the new Heaven is and what it will be like. But for now we should not fear the unknown, for one thing is infallibly true – wherever Christ is, there we too shall be. So it ultimately does not matter where Christ will reside, whether in the exiting heaven, the existing earth, the second heaven, or the second earth. Wherever Christ is there we shall be. This truth alone should be enough to bring comfort to us all. Amen.

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