

# A NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

## REVELATION 21:1-5

2/28/19 & 3/3/19

We began 2019 with the idea of *What's New!* During this mini series we have skimmed over seven pregnant subjects – new creation, new covenant, new heart, new Spirit, new commandment, new song and conclude with the seventh, a new heaven and earth. The first six of our subjects have to do with what has, and continues, to take place. In other words, all six are *already*. The seventh stands alone as the *not-yet*. The seventh extends the other six into the future; it gives them a trajectory pregnant with meaning and vitality.

Wednesday, March 6, begins the season of *Lent* with *Ash Wednesday*. A time to give focus to the flip side of *Advent*. In *Advent* we have time to delight and savor the rich wonder of *birth*. I am fascinated that the human infant enters the world helpless when many other infant creatures instinctively fend for themselves, and yet, the human horizon of possibility far outstrips all creatures. But that was *Advent*. Now we turn to the dark side of the Christian faith – surrender, giving-up, remembering we are but dust, fasting, dying. Welcome to *Lent*.

The *already and not-yet* of the Christian faith brings both *Advent* and *Lent* together, where what is in one becomes richer and more profound only in the presence of the other. They are both seasons worthy of our attention and devotion. They possess the qualities of life wrapped up in the statement of Christ – “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” Matthew 16:24.

### Revelation 21:1-5 – The Message

*I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea.*

*I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband.*

*I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and true.”*

This passage contains a glimpse of our future. N. T. Wright, in his book titled Surprised By Hope, articulates an array of nuances providing texture and color to the “not-yet” awaiting us. Enjoy.

Heaven in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life—God’s dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21-22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but

rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace. 19

“Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.” That remains one of the most powerful and revolutionary sentences we can ever say. As I see it, the prayer was powerfully answered at the first Easter and will finally be answered fully when heaven and earth are joined in the new Jerusalem. Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present. The ultimate future hope remains a surprise, partly because we don’t know when it will arrive and partly because at present we have only images and metaphors for it, leaving us to guess that the reality will be far greater, and more surprising, still. And the intermediate hope—the things that happen in the present time to implement Easter and anticipate the final day—are always surprising because, left to ourselves, we lapse into a kind of collusion with entropy, acquiescing in the general belief that things may be getting worse but that there’s nothing much we can do about them. And we are wrong. Our task in the present is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second. 29-30

We thus arrive at the last and perhaps the greatest image of new creation, of cosmic renewal, in the whole Bible. This scene, set out in Revelation 21-22, is not well enough known or pondered (perhaps because, in order to earn the right to read it, one should really read the rest of the Revelation of St. John first, which proves too daunting for many). This time the image is that of marriage. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. We notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian scenarios in which the end of the story is the Christian going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned, to meet its maker in fear and trembling. As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven, it is heaven that comes to earth; indeed, it is the church itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, that comes down to earth. This is the ultimate rejection of all types of Gnosticism, of every worldview that sees the final goal as the separation of the world from God, of the physical from the spiritual, of earth from heaven. It is the final answer to the Lord’s Prayer, that God’s kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. It is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 1:10, that God’s design, and promise, was to sum up all things in Christ, things both in heaven and on earth. It is the final fulfillment, in richly symbolic imagery, of the promise of Genesis 1, that the creation of male and female would together reflect God’s image in the world. And it is the final accomplishment of God’s great design, to defeat and abolish death forever—which can only mean the rescue of creation from its present plight of decay. 104-105

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles part, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. No, they are different, radically different, but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God’s project is going forward; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God’s will for creation. 105

### **Earth, Land, World – *ge, he oikoumene* and *kosmos***

For the Bible the world is not so much a part of the universe as the place where man lives. ***ge***, which was originally used to distinguish land and soil from the sky (Heaven) and the sea (Water), is more particularly used for the area where man lives and works, or for a country as part of it. When the thought is geographical rather than political, ***he oikoumene*** is more often used. This has no special theological significance in the NT. It is seen rather as the area into which the gospel has to penetrate. Both words are clearly concrete in their application in contrast to ***kosmos*** (world) which has strong philosophical and religious overtones. It may be noted that English idiom often demands the translation “world” for them. NIDNTT, Vol. 1 page 517

### **Heaven, Above, Ascend – *ouranos, ano, anabaino***

Man has always contrasted heaven with his earthly environment. To the physical relationship there has also corresponded a metaphysical one [the subject dealing with first principles or the ultimate nature of existence, reality, and experience]. As well as being a spatial term, heaven became a general expression for everything that has power over man, the domain of gods and spirits. The Greek word ***ouranos*** includes both aspects, the firmament and the abode of God. Sometimes it is replaced by the purely formal ***ano***, above. The verb ***anabaino*** is used in a purely technical sense, especially of the ascent to the temple mountain, to the sanctuary, and also of Jesus’ exaltation and ascension. NIDNTT, Vol. 2, page 184