



“The Arrival of Heaven”

Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5, 17-21

All shall be well.

And all shall be well.

And all manner of thing shall be well.

Julian of Norwich (1343-1416?)

And now, with the arrival of heaven, it is so.

As we approach the end of the story, a few things are clear, set out in chapters 19 & 20. God wins. Satan loses. Jesus reigns. And at the very end of all this, just

before the arrival of the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev. 21:1), all the dead are resurrected. On this point, there is much support in the New Testament. Just as Jesus was raised, so shall we all be raised. We affirm this in the Apostles’ Creed and its promise of the “resurrection of the body.”

It is important to grasp that across the entire Bible, Old Testament and New, this resurrection is of all people, those who have come to God and those who have not. *All* people.

And then all people, now resurrected, stand to be judged, each “according to what they had done” (20:13). All this is recorded in a book, what we might call the book of merit. I don’t know about you, but many of my entries in this book deserve God’s condemnation.

Blessedly, however, there is a second book, the “book of life” (20:12). And all those whose names are found in that book go on to eternity with God and one another in the “new heaven and new earth.” Of course, in whom is there life? In the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – no one else. Jesus is, as he said, the “resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). We are made right with God by trusting in Jesus, in his rescue of us. This is the New Testament through and through. Those whose names are written in the book of life are marked by their faith in Christ.

Then, John’s final visions paint stunning images of the fulfillment of God’s promises. After everything went so tragically wrong in the Garden, God came to Abraham and Sarah and promised to put things right through them, so that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them (Genesis 12:3). And in Rev. 22, the leaves of the tree of life (the tree from the Garden of Eden story) are for “the healing of the nations.”

Moses could not see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:12-23) but here in Revelation 22, we are told that God’s people “will see his face and his name will be on their forehead.”

The prophets looked ahead to an enormous burst of God’s creativity with the arrival of a new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17). Now in Revelation 21:1, they arrive; heaven comes to earth. Or to put it better, earth and heaven become one.

Every hope, every dream that lies in our hearts comes to its realization in these last two chapters. Reconciliation, hope, health, peace, joy, and life itself. They are all here in the abundance of God’s grace.

And as with the rest of Revelation, the closing visions are like a stained glass window in which each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The “new heaven and new earth” is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises “a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life” (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life.

Of course, much of this can be hard to see. The library of sacred writings we call the Bible is vast. It’s easy to get lost in its expanse. 66 books. 1,189 chapters. 31,102 verses.¹ Written, compiled, and edited over many centuries. Millennia ago. Yet, there is an over-arching narrative to this vast library. Here is the story, told not in six acts, but in 109 words:

¹ No need to e-mail me if you have a different number. It all depends on which translation is used, the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts, and who is doing the counting. It is helpful to remember that the original texts had no chapter and verse divisions; these were added much later.

God created the cosmos, pronounced it good, and made humans in his image. He gave them a beautiful place to live and work. Yet, tragically, they tossed it all away for the chance to be like gods themselves. So God set about to put things right. God chose a people, Abraham and his descendants, through whom this restoration would proceed. In the end, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, did for Israel and all humanity what they were and we still are unable to do for ourselves – simply to love God and to love neighbor, thereby enabling the rescue of God’s people and the restoration of God’s good creation.

It is this restoration of God’s creation that is depicted at the end of Revelation with the arrival of the new heaven and new earth.

The Holy City comes to us

One of the things that should surprise you the most about Revelation is that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes to earth, not vice versa. The story doesn’t end with God’s people being spirited way to some distant spot in the cosmos, but with heaven coming to earth. I am pretty sure this is not how many Christians envision eternity. Don’t we head off to spend eternity in our true home, the “place” we came from? No. This is Plato creeping back into things again. In Revelation, the City of God, the new Jerusalem, the Holy City comes here! The city comes down out of heaven (21:10). N. T. Wright, one of the foremost New Testament scholars of our day helps us to grasp this crucial aspect of John’s vision:

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, 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 forwards; 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.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn’t mean, as I have stressed throughout, that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel’s vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual center stage, there is no Temple in this city (21:22). The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary. As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God’s eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.²

The End is a Who

I suppose we can’t help but think of the Revelation’s conclusion as “The End,” like the final credits that roll at the end of a movie. Certainly, the Bible helps us to grasp God’s story and our place in it. As Wright puts it, we are the ones in the story between Acts and Revelation. And, yes, one of the many gifts of the Jews to us all, as Tom Cahill put it, is the knowledge that we are headed somewhere, that history has an arc, a destination.

But we should never forget that at “The End,” stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted in John’s visions. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God’s promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God’s colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

² Wright, T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (116–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.