

Sermon series: the Book of **R e v e l a t i o n**

## **What Will Heaven Be Like?**

Revelation 21 & 22

What do you think heaven will be like? When people wonder about heaven, usually they think in terms of what the living conditions or what the environment is going to look like. A lot of people have a mental picture of heaven, and it may look in your mind like Emerald City from the Wizard of Oz, or like Disneyland.

People wonder and think sometimes, "What about animals?" Every once in a while, I'll get asked by a child: "What about my dog?" This kid will want to know. "Will there be dogs in heaven?" And as best as I can answer, the Bible says that animals don't have souls, so that would seem to imply that the dog you have now really doesn't go to heaven. But will there be dogs in heaven? The Bible describes heaven as a new heaven and a new earth, and all of creation will be set right. So, yes, there will be dogs in heaven.

"What about cats? Will there be cats in heaven?" No! (I heard the hisses friends, you cat lovers.)

People tend to think about what the living conditions will be like in heaven -- about the housing you will have, the foods, and the activities available. Of course, even in this world what matters most about where I live is not the kinds of houses or the recreation. It's what kind of community I'm a part of. What makes heaven, heaven, is not the living conditions. It is who I will be with, and who I will be.

John was guided by God to write the book of Revelation. And he describes heaven as a Holy City, the New Jerusalem. But this is very important to understand: When he talks about this city, he's really speaking about you and me. He is not describing the carpeting and wallpaper of heaven. He is using the image of the city to describe the kind of persons that we will be, and the community that we will create in heaven.

All through Revelation, John uses language in a highly symbolic way. Here's a quote from C. S. Lewis. He wrote,

***"There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of heaven ridiculous by saying they do not***

*want to spend eternity playing harps.... All the Scripture imagery: harps, crowns, gold and so on is, of course, a symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible. People who take these symbols literally, might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, he meant that we were to lay eggs."*

It's symbolic language that John uses as he's given this vision by God to describe the people, the community of God, you and me. So today I want to look at aspects of the kind of person that you will become in your eternal life with God.

First, **You will be thoroughly joyful.** The day is coming when you will be a thoroughly joyful person down to the marrow of your bones. Revelation 21:4 is one of the most beautiful sections of all Scripture: *"And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

One of the first needs that a human being has is the need to be comforted. Mothers and fathers begin to give comfort from the first day of their baby's life. A child is born and it's hungry or sick or wet or thirsty or tired or afraid or in pain. And the parents will dry that child's tears, and tell that child it's going to be okay.

Psychologists say one of the marks of a healthy human being is the capacity to give self-comfort, not to be stuck in misery. Little children need comfort.

But then one day a human being gets to a certain age, and you realize, "Some hurts are not going to get healed. Some hurts will never get healed in this life." Some of you have a hurt like that right now. You can read books on grief. You can join a support group. You can face life with the best attitude possible, and I would recommend all of those things. But there is an ache in your heart that will not go away. And it may never go away until the day you die.

Friends, I want you to listen to one of the most staggering claims in all of the Bible. Paul made it in Romans 8:18: *"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that*

*shall be revealed in us.*" Not just the glory that will be revealed to us, but the glory that will be revealed in us.

Make a little list of the sufferings of this present time: war, famine, loss, cancer, pain, death. Those are the sufferings of this present time.

Paul is saying, "The glory that is to come is so overwhelming that you put the glory of heaven on one side of a scale, and the sufferings of this present time on the other side, and the sufferings of this present age — war, famine, sickness, pain, death — would not even register.

Make your own little list for a moment. Think right now for a moment about your deepest hurt, your worst loss, your most difficult relationship, the place in your heart that is the most breakable, your deepest disappointments.

The hope God shares in the Bible is not that when you become a Christian you get a free pass from the sufferings of this present age. *We live* in our sufferings. The hope you can have is that in this life you can trust God and take your broken heart to Him. And when you get to heaven God Himself is going to look you in the eye and God will wipe away every tear.

Every aching heart will be made whole. Every emotional wound will be healed. Every tear duct will be removed because you won't need it anymore — not there. Sadness will be gone, not through denial or ignorance, but because God will set everything right and you will be a thoroughly joyful person for all of eternity. Does that sound good to anybody in here? Well, that's going to happen.

The second facet of your destiny, who you're going to be, might surprise you a little bit about heaven. **You will be astoundingly productive**. People sometimes wonder, "What will there be to **do** in heaven?" People don't talk about this openly very much, but I'd say the number one fear that folks have about heaven, really, is that it will be kind of boring. And it leads people to be ambivalent about going there at all.

Perhaps this ambivalence is partly because we kind of wonder: Is it just going to be like an eternal retirement village? Are we just going to sing all the time? (I like singing as much as the next guy, but after 30 or 40 billion years, I think I might be ready for a break!)

The Bible says: "***And they will reign for ever and ever.***" Revelation 22:5b Now what does that mean?

This is God redeeming us to be what we were made to be in the first place. In the Garden of Eden, God said that we were created in his image, and we were made to have what? To have dominion over the created order. That is to reign in cooperation with Him over His creation. We were made to work and to be fruitful. We were designed to be co-regents with God.

Let me put it this way: Every one of us has this need to grow and learn, to contribute and produce. Friends, that need is not going to be frustrated in heaven. It's not going to be over. It's going to finally be fully expressed in heaven. Your gifts and abilities will finally be fully actualized.

You will be involved in heaven in ceaseless, creative activity with Jesus and his friends. Jesus will say to you, "Jane, what do you think we ought to do?" And you will answer with creative, unique genius, wisdom and insight. "*Well, of course, I'm not omniscient, but I think . . .*" and you'll say whatever you think. And Jesus will say, "That's a great idea. Why don't you do that?"

One of the great promises in Scripture comes in Matthew 25. There's the parable of the talents. Jesus says the day is coming in the next world, when the Father will say to us: "***You have been faithful with few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness.***" Matthew 25:21 And you will be given great responsibilities -- responsibilities that compared to whatever you're doing now is just a few things.

Some of you have been wondering about heaven. Will there be an intellectual challenge to wrap my mind around? Or will there be adventures that require greatness of spirit? Will there be tasks that need strength of will and character to be done? Will there be a

place for creative, compelling, articulate communication? Well, duh! Of course there will.

So now, you apply yourself to grow as much as you can. You hone your gifts and develop your skills. Wherever you work, work with diligence and passion because heaven is not a retirement village. Your real contributions are all before you. You will be thoroughly joyful. You will be amazingly productive.

Here's number three: **You will be morally flawless.** How many of you have even one bad habit you'd like to change? How many of you don't really, but the person next to you has got a whopper?

I remember thinking many years ago that by the time I hit age 40 I'd be pretty much all together. And instead, decades later, I am increasingly aware of how much more needs to be changed in me, and my inability to change it.

God, however, says, "*I'm making everything new,*" Revelation 21:5 -- and that includes you. You will have a new heart. You will effortlessly love Jesus and all of his friends. You will have a new mind, and the only thoughts that will pass through it are those that are noble and good. You will have a new mouth. You will just speak words of moral beauty and gracious truth.

In heaven you will be thoroughly joyful, astoundingly productive, morally flawless, and – fourth -- **you will be completely fulfilled.**

*"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month."* John writes about clear water and fruit. This is where we read about the food service, what we'll eat and drink in heaven — water and 12 varieties of fruit. And some of you are a little disappointed. You were hoping for a really good pizza in heaven.

Seriously, please understand, this is not the menu. The idea here is you will be completely fulfilled.

In this world, we desire, but our desires are frustrated. We dream, and our dreams go unfulfilled. We think if we could just have more we would be content. And we get more, but it's never enough. Some of you here are deeply discontent in some area of your life, and you're tempted to try to satisfy an appetite right now in a way that is not honoring to God.

The day is coming when the only desire you have will be for that which is good and every desire will be fulfilled — for intimacy, for significance, for community, for beauty, for love.

Karl Barth, a famous theologian, used one word for salvation, and that word was fulfillment. He said, "Salvation is fulfillment — the supreme, sufficient, definitive, indestructible fulfillment of our being."

In heaven, God will give you the gift of being completely fulfilled.

The very best part of heaven is that **God will be there**. Here are these amazing words, words that you can hardly even read without your heart breaking: *"Now the dwelling of God is with men [people], and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God."* Revelation 21:3 God will be there, and you will be with God.

Later John writes: *"I did not see a temple in the city."* The temple, of course, was a place that people needed to go to meet with God. But now there's no need for a temple because God fills every inch.

Think of how we long to see certain parts of God's creation. People will travel long distances to see Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon. They will be astounded the first time they see an ocean. We'll go through efforts to see all kinds of things.

The day is coming when you will see God. This is not something you just do in five minutes. This is not something you finish. The scene is not like people who stand in line and then they see that, and leave. You know, the whole universe can fit inside the palm of God's hand, and it would take us forever to explore the universe. Think of what it will be like to explore God — the infinite God, Creator of all that is.

And John says, "We'll see his face." You'll see the face of God — you. This phrase was used of kings in John's day, and it meant more than just glimpsing him on a horse as he rode by. It meant to be granted an audience with him, to be near the king, to know the king, to rejoice in the king. And you're going to do that. You're going to chat up God!

John is real clear about one other thing: Not all human beings will end up in that city. There are those who choose to be outside who will spend a Christless eternity. And that fate also is very real. So I hope, as well as savoring and anticipating and hoping for being in heaven, you do everything you can to help everyone you know spend eternity living with God.

You know what I think one of the best things about heaven is? I think one of the best aspects of heaven is that it's free. **It's a gift of God's love to you. He gives you heaven ONLY because of how much He loves.**

Sometimes people get real confused about this. Sometimes even among us here, we get confused about the way to heaven.

In this life there is really nothing for free. We have to work for, or earn, or pay for everything we get in one way or another.

It's natural for us then to assume that admission to heaven is the same way. We have to earn it or deserve it somehow.

Maybe you have said or thought to yourself: *"I'm not a bad person. I'm not perfect, but who is? I haven't done anything really bad. I try to be nice and help people. I live a decent lifestyle. So I think I stand a fair shot of getting into heaven."*

But you know what? The truth is God tells us in the Bible that even the **best** we can do is like filthy rags. Sin and selfishness is like a rot that has gone all the way through every one of us, so that *"There is no one who is good, not even one."* ROMANS 3:12 God declares, *"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...."* ROMANS 3:22b-23. All of us fall short of heaven — the glory of God.

And it's because we don't have the **capacity** to earn or deserve heaven, that God worked out His plan to offer you heaven

as a **free gift**. He sent Jesus, His Son, to live a perfect life for your credit, and to die on the cross to take away all your wrongs and sins. He forgives you, and offers you heaven **FREELY!** That's what grace is all about! God says it this way in the Bible: **"...The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."** Romans 6:23b The GIFT of God ... the GIFT OF GOD, is eternal life – ETERNAL LIFE in heaven – in Christ Jesus our Lord. Isn't that GREAT NEWS?

So friends, if you're looking to yourself to get yourself to heaven, GIVE IT UP! Look instead **ONLY** to **JESUS CHRIST!** Let Him be your Savior. Let Him love you, and GIVE you heaven. That's the only way. And when you trust in Jesus as your way to heaven, then you can know **FOR SURE** that you're going there. You can have **CONFIDENCE** – not just a wish, or a hope, or a golly-I-wanta-go-to-heaven --- You can know you're going to heaven **FOR SURE**. Because it's been guaranteed when Jesus died and rose again for you.

In heaven you will be thoroughly joyful. You will be astoundingly productive. You will be morally flawless. And you will be with God. You want to go there?

I want to close with these words. Some of you know C. S. Lewis in his series the Narnia Chronicles where he writes about kind of the spiritual quest of human beings. At the end of it, as he's trying to capture what heaven is about, this is what he writes. This is kind of the end of the earthly side of the story when their life in heaven begins. This is what he writes:

**"The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us, this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all live happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.**

**"All their life in this world had only been the cover and the title page. And now, at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before."** C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia*