

Dr. Jack Cottrell on Paradise



This text [Lk.23:39-43] suggests both consciousness and disembodiment after death. The very concept of Paradise implies a state of blessing (Hoekema, *Bible*, 103), but how can it be a blessing if it is not consciously experienced? Also, that Jesus promised the thief he would be *with* Jesus that very day implies conscious existence, excluding soul sleep, “for what would be the point of saying these words if the thief after death would be totally unaware of being with Christ in Paradise?” (ibid.).

Jesus’ promise to the thief also shows that existence in Paradise is a state of disembodiment. This is suggested by the fact that Christ himself in Paradise would be in a disembodied state, since his resurrection would not occur until Sunday. Hence the thief would also be in a disembodied condition in Paradise.

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Where, then, do the souls of the righteous go when separated from the body at death? Their destiny is never called Sheol or Hades. They are described as being in Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:23), in Paradise (Luke 23:43), “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8), and under the heavenly altar (Rev 6:9). We may refer to this simply as Paradise (see 2 Cor 12:4), which should not be considered as just one section of Hades. Righteous souls have been “made perfect” (Heb 12:23), and that includes being made fully alive in a spiritual sense. They no longer have the stench and penalty of spiritual death about them, and thus are not proper citizens of Hades. The righteous are “in Hades” only in the sense that their *bodies* are in the grave.

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III. THE QUALITY OF LIFE ON THE NEW EARTH

What will life be like on the new earth, i.e., in our eternal heaven? It will indeed be “the Paradise of God” (Rev 2:7), with all the positive connotations that word includes. Perhaps the biblical word that most accurately describes it is “glory” (*doxa*). True glory is inherent only in the nature of God; it is the totality of his greatness and the majesty of all his perfections as they are manifested and as they shine forth for all to see. But through his power and wisdom, when God works his mighty works of creation and redemption, the glory that is inherent within him is imparted to his creatures so that his own glory shines in and through them. As applied to the new creation and especially to the new earth, we may say that it will be *glorious* in that it will radiate an aura of grandeur, power, brilliance, splendor, majesty, beauty, purity, and dignity that will fill us with awe and cause us simply to praise God.

When Christians think of heaven they think of glory and sometimes call it “glory land” (as in “I’ve got a home in glory land that outshines the sun”). We also anticipate our own existence there as an experience of glory: “When, by the gift of His infinite grace, I am accorded in Heaven a place, just to be there and to look on His face, will through the ages be glory for me” (Charles H. Gabriel). Scripture speaks of heaven as glory (Rom 2:7,10; Eph 1:18; Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 5:10). Christians are filled with “the hope of glory” (Col 1:27; see Rom 5:2; 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17). We will have bodies of glory (Rom 8:21; 1 Cor 15:43; Phil 3:21) and crowns of glory (1 Pet 5:4). When John saw the new Jerusalem coming down to the new earth, he saw it as “having the glory of God” (Rev 21:4), since “the glory of God has illumined it” (Rev 21:23).

Thus when we ask what life will be like in our eternal home the answer truly is, “O that will be glory for me!” This is true in several respects.

A. Glories of Our Physical Life

I have no qualms about speaking of the new heavens and new earth (as well as our new bodies) as physical or material, since they will be a new version of the visible creation. However, I do not expect their material stuff to be constructed according to the same principles and patterns of atomic physics found in this present world. I believe that one result of the recreating process of 1 Pet 3:10–12 will be a new kind of material stuff, one that is not subject to breakdown and decay. It will, however, be *material stuff*. Also, I see no reason to think the new earth will be radically different from our present earth in terms of soil and water, and plant life such as trees and flowers (Rev 22:1–2). We may think of it as something like the prefall earth, or this earth with the curses of Genesis 3 removed (Rev 22:3); but it will be much more, e.g., a worldwide Eden or an eternal millennium-type kingdom.

The physical glory of the new earth will be manifested in various ways, especially in its *beauty*. John's main description of the new world is limited to "the holy city, new Jerusalem," which came down to the new earth (Rev 21:2–4; 21:10–22:5). This city is identified as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev 21:9), meaning that its inhabitants are the redeemed saints. Also we must recognize that the physical descriptions may be symbolic of presently hidden realities. Thus we cannot be dogmatic in our conclusions. Still, if John's description of the city has any physical application at all, it is that the new earth will possess a beauty that can be expressed only in terms of precious jewels, pure gold, and majestic size (a cube 1,500 miles on each side).

Some of the most striking aspects of the physical life and environment of the new earth have to do with what will *not* be there. One, there will be no darkness, "no night there" (Rev 21:25; 22:5), "for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev 21:23). Thus there is no need for the sun or moon or for lamps (Rev 21:25; 22:5). That there is no darkness means we will have nothing to fear and nothing to hide.

Two, there will be no danger there, nothing to threaten our peace and safety. This is symbolized in God's promise that on the new earth, "the wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like an ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain" (Isa 65:25). This is also the reason why "there is no longer any sea" on the new earth (Rev 21:1); to the ancients the sea was a source of jeopardy and peril.

Third, there will be no physical discomfort in heaven: no hunger, thirst, or excessive heat (Rev 7:16) and no pain (Rev 21:4). These are representative of discomforts of all kinds.

Fourth and most significantly, "there will no longer be any death" (Rev 21:4). In earlier prophecy God suggested that in the new universe death will simply be irrelevant (Isa 65:20,22), but in his more complete and final revelation he indicates that it will be removed altogether. The curse of death as Adam's legacy upon the race (Gen 2:17; 3:19) will be gone. Those in resurrection bodies "cannot even die anymore" (Luke 20:36).

Stated positively, the greatest physical glory of heaven is the everlasting, never-ending life that will be bestowed upon us. Even now we have the spiritual aspect of that life, but then it will empower our bodies as well (Rom 6:23; 8:10–11). An environment where life reigns instead of death is marked by the presence of "springs of the water of life" (Rev 7:17; 21:6), "a river of the water of life" (Rev 22:1,17), and the tree of life in a variety of forms (Rev 2:7; 22:2,14). We will live forever in imperishable, immortal bodies (1 Cor 15:42,53–54) that are not subject to pain or discomfort.

What about activities that give us physical pleasure in our present lives, i.e., eating, drinking, and sex? This question is neither irrelevant nor

irreverent, for these are normal and good activities in this life. Concerning eating and drinking, in Rev 19:7–9 heaven is represented as a wedding feast; and Isa 65:21 says, “They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” The water of life and the tree of life suggest that eating and drinking will still be natural. Revelation 7:16 says there will be no hunger or thirst there. Is this because we will always have all we want to eat and drink, or simply because eating and drinking will no longer be necessary? If the latter is the case, then the tree of life and the water of life are just symbols of “never-ending and totally satisfying refreshment by the Spirit” (Gilmore, 116). There really is no biblical basis for ruling out literal eating and drinking, however.

We do have a biblical reason for thinking there will be no sexual relations in heaven, though. Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees’ question in Matt 22:23–33 implies that husband-wife relationships of all kinds will be transcended in heaven: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (v. 30). Since sexual relations are intended for marriage only, this seems to exclude them from our new-earth relationships. This does not mean, however, that our new bodies will necessarily be genderless (see Lewis, *Miracles*, 165–166; Gilmore, ch. 13, “Sex in Heaven?”).

Erickson raises the question, “If there is to be no eating nor sex, will there be any pleasure in heaven?” He rightly answers “that the experiences of heaven will far surpass anything experienced here,” as indicated by 1 Cor 2:9 (NIV), “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (*Theology*, 1239–1240). Gilmore (84) says it well: “Glorified bodies will, doubtless, involve glorious action and enormous enjoyment. It would seem that some form of the pleasures of sight, sound, touch, and (less so) taste will be part of the new earth.”

B. Glories of the Heart and Mind

The greatest glories of heaven will no doubt be those of the inner life, including those that affect our intellectual and emotional states. From a negative perspective the most significant of these will be the complete absence of sorrow. Revelation 21:4 says that “there will no longer be any mourning”; nor will there be any crying, for “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (see Rev 7:17). Concerning the new earth “there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying” (Isa 65:19).

This raises the question of whether we will retain any memories of our life on this earth, since for many of us it seems that this is a life of “constant sorrow.” In view of the fact that there will be no sorrow in heaven, we must conclude that God wipes away not only our tears but also any memories that would cause such tears. These are part of “the former things” that “will not be remembered or come to mind” in the new life (Isa 65:17); “the first

things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

On the other hand we cannot think that our entire memories of our former lives will be erased, since a main part of one’s personal identity will be his remembrance of his relationship with Jesus Christ during this present life. As Gilmore says (316), “In the life of the resurrected righteous, it appears our memories of God’s grace on earth will continue, revive, sharpen, and be part of the impetus behind praising God.” So in the final analysis we conclude that we will have very good memories of this life (probably even better than the ones we now have!), but that God will erase from them whatever might cause us sorrow.

This gives us reason to believe that we will remember and recognize members of the saved community that we knew in our old lives. Indeed, Gilmore (329) speculates that this will be one of the main causes for joy and laughter in heaven, namely, reunion with loved ones separated from us by death (see Luke 6:21).

This leads to a consideration of one of the main glories of the heart in heaven, namely, constant joy. Everything that happens in heaven, as already discussed above and yet to be discussed below, is a source of happiness and joy. Concerning the new earth God says in Isa 65:18, “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness.” Sometimes the word *makarios* in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–11) is translated “happy” instead of “blessed.” Either way the joys of the new earth are the ultimate fulfillment of the Beatitudes. “The pure will see God, the poor will possess the imperishable, the persecuted will have losses restored, the deprived will have immediate access to all parts of the renovated earth” (Gilmore, 113). No wonder there is joy!

Another glory of the inner life in our new-earth existence will be the many activities in which we will be engaged. This could have been discussed under the glories of the physical life, but I choose to include it here because activity is as much a state of the mind as it is bodily exertion. It is true that we may think of eternal life as in some sense a state of *rest*, just as the promised land was a gift of rest for the Israelites (see Heb 3:18–4:11). But this is rest from toil and mental stress, not rest from activity, nor even rest from work. Adam and Eve had plenty of work assigned to them before sin’s curse turned it into toil (Gen 3:17–19). With the curse removed from the new earth, we can engage once more in a variety of activities without toil and stress.

Thus we should note that heaven will not be rest in the sense of an absence of productive activity; it will not be just “endless rows of hammocks” (Gilmore, 176). Nor will our only activity be singing praises to God, as is perhaps some angels’ prerogative (Rev 4:8), since what angels do is not necessarily what we will do. In fact, on the new earth we will not be

rubbing shoulders with angels, because they will still be in their own invisible universe while we are in our new visible one.

Nor should we expect to be bored with our heavenly activities, even though we will be engaged in them forever. A main reason for this is that our new life will be one of endless challenges to grow in our knowledge and understanding not only of God but of the new universe. Being finite even in our new bodies, we will never have “perfect knowledge” (contra Erickson, *Theology*, 1235). There will be a new universe to probe and to explore, indeed, to conquer, in reference to its potential for science and the arts. Here we will finally be able to do justice to the original cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) wherein the human race was commanded to subdue and rule over the earth. When Rev 5:10 says that the saved will be “a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (see Rev 21:24; 22:5), this does not mean that we will rule over *people*, but over the *new universe itself*.

Gilmore sums this up well: “Heaven, if anything, is perfected action: doing more, doing it better; and having more space in which to do it. We contend that heaven is pell-mell, reflective exploration and not occupied with immobile contemplations” (73). “Adventures in the kingdom of heaven await the ransomed church” (84). The new universe “requires a magnificent full-scale active life in the habitation, use, and governing of the new earth by those who are part of the blissful eternal state” (87). But if one *wants* to rest, he will surely be able to do so!

C. Glories of the Spirit

Surely the greatest glories of our eternal life in heaven will be those of the spirit, those that have to do with what are sometimes called morality and religion. While everything about our heavenly life will be God-oriented and thus “religious,” some of it will be more directly so. That is the aspect of new-earth existence we are dealing with here.

Without question the most unspeakably marvelous glory of our life on the new earth will be the fact that *God himself will be present there*. When John saw the new Jerusalem descending to the new earth, he also “heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’ ” (Rev 21:3, ESV). The heavenly city contains no temple, “for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev 21:22); “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it” (Rev 22:3). This does not refer to the omnipresence of God; nor does it mean that the immortal, invisible essence of God, who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16), will become visibly present to us. Nor does it mean that God will no longer be manifesting his presence to the angels in the spiritual throne room. What it means is that in the new earth God will establish a new throne room and will provide redeemed saints with

a permanent theophany, similar to the one with which he will continue to bless the angels. In this way the pure in heart will see God forever (Matt 5:8); “they will see His face” (Rev 22:4). Herein will be the source of our greatest joy: “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps 16:11; see 27:4).

One advantage we will have over the angels is that the resurrected Christ, the Lamb of God, will no longer sit on God’s throne in their presence, but will move to the new throne room on our new earth. Indeed, “the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd” (Rev 7:17); it is “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev 22:1,3).

The fact that God will manifest his presence on the new earth is the reason why we call it “heaven.” Hoekema well says, “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” (*Bible*, 274). From that point on, then, there will actually be *three* “theological” heavens: the divine dimension itself, the divine throne room in the angelic realm, and the divine throne room on the new earth. Since God’s presence is what makes the new earth a true heaven, we can say that as far as our eternal state is concerned, we do not “go to heaven,” but heaven comes to us.

Because God’s very presence will be made visible to us, and because Christ himself is there, the most enticing and the most satisfying of our heavenly activities will be to worship and to commune with them with a consistency and a fervor that may now seem impossible. Revelation 7:9–10 pictures the multitude of the redeemed standing before the throne and before the Lamb, singing praises to God and the Lamb. This will not necessarily be constant, but it will be regular.

Another spiritual glory of the new earth will be the complete absence of sin and everything caused by sin. Our redeemed spirits will already be fully sanctified and spiritually perfected in their intermediate state (Heb 12:23), and our new bodies will contain none of the residue of sin that infected the old ones. Thus in our final state we will be as spiritually pure and beautiful as a holy bride dressed for her wedding: “It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev 19:8). We will live forever in a completely glorified state, unable to sin again (Habermas and Moreland, 150–151). Our environment will also be completely sinless, since the purifying fire of 2 Pet 3:10–12 completely cleansed the old earth of all the effects of sin that had corrupted it. The result is “a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13). John’s vision of the new earth assures us that no sinners will be present there (Rev 21:8,27; 22:15). All its residents will have hearts of gold, which is more important than harps of gold or streets of gold.

Finally we may mention the spiritual glory of getting to know all of God's saints from all ages and all parts of the globe. The 144,000 in Rev 7:4–8 probably represent symbolically the total saved from OT Israel, while the Christians from the NT era are represented in Rev 7:9 as “a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues.” Here unity and diversity are combined in a way that provides an opportunity for unlimited fellowship.

We conclude this chapter on heaven by noting that this glorious new earth and indeed new universe will be the ultimate fulfillment of God's original purpose for creating “the heavens and the earth” in the first place (Gen 1:1). This will be the final phase of the “kingdom of heaven” promised in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3,10). Herein we will find and eternally explore all the treasures we have stored up “in heaven” (Matt 6:20); herein lies the final installment of our inheritance “reserved in heaven” (1 Pet 1:4; see Matt 5:5; Eph 1:13–14), the long-awaited fulfillment of Jesus' promise, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great” (Matt 5:12). Perhaps it will all be summed up in the word “bliss”: “a bliss of love, of *koinonia* in the Spirit, of reunion, of praise and worship, of the joy of being with Christ, and perhaps of some form of divine service” (Wirt, 11).

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