

I. Set Up:

A. Today we finish our Afterlife series. After looking at eternity, death, the resurrection, judgment and hell, we arrive at Heaven. Finally!

B. 2 Corinthians 5:1 says: **For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.**

C. Mike is going to be walking us through a long section of Revelation 21. I am going to read verses 1-7 as he walks up.

II. Intro

A. In 1974, peasants digging a well in the Shaanxi province of China made a discovery that would eventually lead archeologists to unearth more than 7,000 life-sized clay soldiers – a royal army – standing in battle formation to protect the grave of one of China’s first emperors, Shih Huang Ti

1. These life-sized soldiers were buried with chariots, weapons and horses – harnessed in gold and silver. Which seems like a lot of money to burry in the dirt. But archeologists reason that this king saw death as a battleground and he didn’t want to go unprepared.¹

B. In Egypt we have the pyramids - the physical evidence of the preparation the Egyptian Pharaohs took. Some so large that it’s estimated that it took tens of thousands of workers two decades to complete.

1. That seems like an unbearable expense for any king. But the Pharaohs reasoned that they would spend more time on the other side of the grave than they would here, so they did whatever he could to prepare. They were thinking about the life to come.

C. It follows that if life is short, eternity is not, and opportunity is now – that how we live today shapes what happens when we die that we should spend time thinking and planning for it.

D. But we don’t. Why not?

1. I suspect one reason is that we have it pretty good right here² - plenty to eat and plenty to do. We stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer. We have wonderful medical care that, even though it can’t always cure us, it almost always can lessen the pain. We have a lot of political freedom. Yes, we can find things to complain about – and we do. But few of us are facing the king of turmoil that would lead us to long to die.

2. And I suspect we don’t think much about heaven because we are not anxious to be reminded of our own mortality.

3. And I would argue that we do not think much about heaven because we don’t think much about anything.

E. But perhaps the biggest reason we don't think about heaven is because we don't know what to think about. There are a few popular conceptions out there – beyond the classic, pearly gates where angels sing and you wear a white robe and sit on a cloud playing a harp, but they are hardly more inspiring

1. What a friend calls: Disney for the Dead – a wonder land where chocolate isn't fattening, and our golf game is flawless.³
2. Some talk about Worship World – just one big church service, where we all wear choir robes, sing perfectly. Which does NOT sound fun. I think Mark Twain was on to something when he had Huck Finn express a desire to go to hell because Huck's primpy old aunt described heaven in such an unappealing way.⁴
3. The third is Ah Ha Land – where you get your questions answered. Life makes sense. We get all our questions answered. Find out why the Cubs had to go 100 plus years between World Series wins.

F. Whether it's true or not that Satan doesn't have to convince us that heaven isn't real just that it's boring, what we have is not very compelling. And so many think more about a two-week vacation than they do an eternity in heaven. It's a second best option. Given a choice between heaven and hell, people want heaven. But given a choice between heaven and earth, few express any overlap with Paul's comments in Philippians 1.⁵

G. The good news here is that the Bible has a lot to say about heaven.

1. There are a number of different Hebrew and Greek words that are translated heaven, and they occur over 800 times in the Bible. And while some of these refer to the sky⁶ (the rain falls from the heavens) and some to describe the cosmos (Ps. 19:1-2 – The heavens declare the glory of God), most of the time these terms refer to the “third heaven” which is the dwelling place of God.

- a) The place Paul writes about in 1 Cor. 12 when he said— talking about himself, I believe—I know a man who, whether physically or spiritually I don't know, God knows, was called up into the third heaven, and saw things that were unbelievable.

2. Just about every book in the Bible mentions heaven,¹³ And Jesus speaks of it at some very critical junctures in His ministry, such as right after He chose the twelve in Mt. 6:20, he said, “Don't lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy. Instead, store up your treasures in heaven.

H. So, the good news is that the Bible has a fair bit to say about heaven. The bad news is that much of it is in the Book of Revelation – which is not the easiest book to understand. And we do not get answers to some of our questions.

III. Revelation 21:1-2, 9f

A. Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

1. Many are aware that in 2 Peter 3 we are told that the earth destroyed. Some seem less aware that it is restored. There is a new earth.

B. Also there was no more sea.

1. Not a happy thought for those of us who like to sail. I'm not too worried about it. The main point being made here is that there is no trouble.
2. Forty years in the desert left the Jews without a lot of swimming skills. They didn't much like the water. Psalm 93 is one I turn to in the hospital. It speaks

C. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

1. The fact that it is a city suggests activity - not fleece-lined clouds. It also implies other people.
2. The fact that it is Jerusalem would get all kinds of attention. This is going to warm the heart of John's readers.
 - a) When they were in captivity, they longed for it.⁷ I don't want to sound like Dorothy longing for Kansas, but there is no place like home. Right?
 - b) This highlights what today's headlines confirm, there is something unique and central about this city. It will remain the center of attention. Ground zero.
3. Let's also be sure we don't miss that it comes down - that heaven comes down to earth.
 - a) Many have this idea that our future is up there in a spiritual state. No. Our hope is not for some ethereal, wispy, vaporous spirit world in the sky, where we are disembodied souls hovering around.⁸
 - b) We get a new earth. In I Corinthians 15 we see that Christ's resurrection was the First Fruits. There is more. God restores it all.
 - c) The Germans have a word for this. I ran it a few weeks ago in my newsletter. Sensucht – it means blissful longing - soul longing - for things you never had. The family you never had. The body, the world you never had. It is what we were made for.
 - d) When sin entered the world we lost so much. Our relationship with God was upended, but not just that. Our relationships with each other and with a good world, all fell apart.
 - e) We entered into a world aging, disease and death. We've only ever known it as broken. We've only ever lived East of Eden.
 - f) But when our relationship with God is put right, all other relationships will be put right.

D. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men - God is showing up to be among us. ... and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God.”⁴

1. Of course, this is the best part. We not only get an earth without sin. We get God. He walks among us.

E. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

F. Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

G. Jump down to V10. John is carried by an angel to see more of this vision: And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem

H. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, **descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also, she had a great and high wall with 12 gates, and 12 angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the 12 tribes of the children of Israel: 3 gates on the east, 3 gates on the north, 3 gates on the south, and 3 gates on the west.**

I. Now the wall of the city had 12 foundations, and on them were the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: 12,000 furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal.

1. Which is about 1,500 miles each way, or roughly the size of the continental USA, only cubed.¹

2. The fact that he says it's a cube is likely an allusion to the holy of holies - the inner sanctuary in the Temple that only the high priest could go into and then only once a year).

J. Then he measured its wall: 144 cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel.

K. The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones. (And then he lists them).

L. Down to v. 22: **But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.**

1. Remember, Jesus makes this claim. The Temple is where heaven and earth meet. Where people go to be with God. Where we go to be forgiven. Jesus claims to be the true and better Temple.

M. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb *is* its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

IV. Let's not miss what is going on here. Many treat the book of Revelation like some 21st century apocalyptic puzzle that – if we solve it – we can understand exactly what is going on today and what will happen next. No. This book wasn't written for us to engage in this kind of speculation. It was written to people who were headed into real hardship.

A. It was written for people who were about to suffer death. The Roman emperor Domitian was about to ramp up the persecution of Christians. They were not only going to lose jobs and homes. Some would be feed to the lions in the arena. Some would be lit on fire. Hundreds would be crucified.

B. What did John give them? He gave them a vision of the future – which provided hope that carried them along. It changed them. We know that they took their suffering with poise and peace. They sang hymns in the face of death and forgave the people killing them.

C. And this won people over. The more they killed the Christians the more the movement grew. It led Tertullian to declare that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

D. Men and women, we need that hope because we are hope shaped creatures. The way we live now is controlled by what we believe about our future. If we believe that when we die it's game over. There is nothing else that follows, then we will live one way. But if we believe that we will live forever – that their will be a judgement and then eternity will follow based on what you did. We will live differently.

E. What we believe about what comes next leads to very different lives

F. We are shaped by what we think follows. We need hope that it is good. But we do not need any hope, we need this hope.

1. There is an argument to be made that belief in a better life to come helps people survive when they otherwise might not. I think that is true.⁹

2. And at this moment, believing in a better future is important. I can't imagine that any of us will get fed to the lions or lit on fire, but we will all face hardships, and some of us may face some marginalization (even persecution) because of our stand for Jesus)

3. But it is not what I am arguing.

4. I am not arguing that we should believe this because it will help us get through the night. I think we should believe this because it is true. Among the many things Jesus did was promise eternal life.

V. So, John says, “I saw heaven coming down to earth.” He has been pulled up to meet with Jesus. And in the middle of this vision an angel says, “I want to show you the New Jerusalem” And he sees this city coming down out of the sky.

A. The fact that it is lit up with the glory of God and that he goes into so much detail about the precious stones, makes it sound like it is opulent – that it has a high wow factor.

B. The wall being 72’ thick speaks of security.

C. When we step away we see that John is trying to describe the indescribable. And the limitations of human language force him into this highly symbolic description. And so John uses it as he speaks, symbolically, about this perfect cube, with a huge wall, gates of pearls and streets of gold.

D. So, from this passage we come away with an understanding that heaven is: Indescribable. Perfect. Opulent. Secure. We are to see it as a place so beyond what we now know that one of our most precious commodities is used to pave the streets

VI. There are a few other places where the new earth is described: ink:

A. Such as 1 Cor. 15, where we hear more about our new body – which will be the same but much better. Remember, in this chapter we are told that Jesus rose physically from the grave. It wasn’t his spirit that went missing. It was his body. And then he appeared with a new body

1. It was a bit different, but it was a real body. He ate fish. Remember, to prove he wasn’t some ghost.

2. We get bodies without sickness or sprained ankles or headaches or cancer. No more growing old, or breaking down. No grief. No grave.

B. Rev. 22:3, where we see that there is work to be done.¹⁰

C. We have different building motifs:

1. Isaiah 6 we get an image of a magnificent temple.

2. In Luke 14 we hear about a banquet hall.

3. In I Cor. 9 Paul describes heaven in such a way that it sounds like a sports’ arena where victors are crowned for their accomplishments

VII. Of course, in I John 3:2 we are reminded that we see God. We get the beatific vision

- A. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul reports that he is not allowed to report on what he saw. He implies that he couldn't begin to explain it, but he's told not to try. And because he was given that vision he was also given a thorn in the flesh to keep him dependent on Christ.
- B. The best thing about heaven isn't heaven, it's God. This is where he is most. This is what we pray – Our Father who art in heaven.”
- C. I read part of a book by Richard Baxter – *The Saints Ever Lasting Rest* – and he lists a bunch of things we will enjoy about heaven:
1. Freedom from all evil – we can't imagine. This means freedom from all guilt and shame.
 2. We get our highest degree of perfection. We have perfect friendships and fullness of joy.
 3. We are free to rest from all that is bad.
 4. But the biggest is God's presence.
- D. I want to be sure you know that heaven is real.¹¹ and I want your understanding of that to give you hope to live and serve well.

VIII. I want to end by circling back to the first sermon and challenge you to raise your vision.

- A. I had a long dinner with a dear friend this week. I was briefly in Washington DC doing some prep work for a Lakelight trip there in '25. I had not been to the Museum of the Bible, which I had been hearing about. It far exceeded my expectations. Nearly \$1 billion was invested in the museum.
- B. This friend left me challenged and encouraged. In response to my bit of whining about how many things are trending in the wrong direction, he said:
- C. Michael, why are you surprised when the world acts like the world. He noted that our vocation at the moment is to balance the joys and sorrows of this life.
- D. The first part of this is easy. We weep with those who weep. This doesn't take much effort. But carrying joy does. Being resilient does. It requires that - Col. 3:1 – we set our mind on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Not on earthly things
- E. We need to remind ourselves – 2 Cor. 4 - that the trials we face here are light and momentary afflictions, that are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen.
- F. And that requires us to start living today as if the promises of God are true and the kingdom of God has already started breaking out.
- G. If you are in Christ you have an invitation to a grand banquet and a marvelous eternity that is too good to be described or imagined. And it is certain. We need to let that be wind in our sails and start living as if it is true.

H. As a rule, I try to keep my expectations in check so as not to be disappointed later on. I don't want to over-expect. That is not possible when it comes to heaven.¹² No eyes have seen, or ears heard, or mind conceived of what God has prepared for those who love Him (I Corinthians 2:9)

¹ Billy Graham's book, *Facing Death*.

² This is the Heaven on Earth Theory.

³ This is from Dan Meyer's series: *Afterlife*. At Christ Church Oak Brook.

⁴ "Now she got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to lie around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned that Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, 'Not by a considerable sight.' I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together."

⁵ Note: Paul was not married and did not have children and that changes a lot of things. But it's really only a part of our reason for wanting to stay.

⁶ E.g., Deut. 11:11 (the clouds of heaven) and Psalm 147:8 (the rain from heaven). In fact, the NIV now just translates this as sky.

¹³ 13 do not.

⁷ Psalm 137:5 sums it up: "If I forget you, Oh, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you. If I do not exalt you above my chief joy." To the Jew, Jerusalem was like home, only better. And so, when John says, "I saw heaven" – and he uses the word "New Jerusalem" to describe it – he is saying, "It's like going home."

⁸ I think Silicon Valley's Day of Inflection – when technology finally jumps to the place where just about anything is possible. Where we can download our mind onto a disk and gain eternal life – sounds horrible.

⁹ In my study this week I was directed to some lectures given by Howard Thurman (from Tim Keller's sermon on New Heaven and New Earth) – a black pastor and writer - at Harvard as part of a lecture series in his honor. The one I was directed to was on the African American Spiritual. Many of the slaves had a strong hope in heaven. At this particular conference, there was criticism of the spirituals because it was held that their belief in heaven made them docile and submissive. They were going to allow judgement to be established by God. Howard Thurman heard this and pushed back. He said, "The facts had it clear that this sung faith served to deepen the capacity of the slaves for endurance and their ability to absorb their suffering and it taught a people how to ride high in life. How to look squarely in the face of those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that their environment, with all its cruelty could not crush. This enabled them to reject annihilation and to affirm a terrible right to live."

¹⁰ From Hebrews 12:22 and Luke 19f we pick up that at least some of us will be involved in governmental duties. Don't get your blood pressure up. I don't see anything about taxes or elections.

¹¹ Peter Kreeft, the Catholic theologian and author, writes in the intro to his book, *Everything You've Always Wanted to Know about Heaven but Were Afraid to Ask*, opens his book noting that he capitalized the "H" in Heaven and Hell because they are as real as Peoria and Timbuktu." DL. Moody went so far as to say that heaven is just as real as New York or Chicago. In fact, it is more real because in 1,000 years it's doubtful that those places will still be around, but heaven will be. The idea that heaven is some kind of ethereal, mystical, magical place that is here and there and everywhere and nowhere just doesn't line up. Heaven is not a state of consciousness. It is not a dimension of this life. It is not a product of our thinking. Jesus rose from the grave physically and now sits at the right hand of God the Father. The hope of the believer is for a physical resurrection.

¹² In "[Running Away](#)," a song by Peter Himmelman (Bob Dylan's son-in-law, a practicing Jew) and Karen Peris (Catholic), the lyrics list a bunch of somewhat confusing lines – "There'll be no dancing. There'll be no symphony there, symphony there, symphony there. There'll be no laughing. There'll be no stamping of feet, stamping of feet, stamping of feet. There'll be no crying. There'll be no singing the blues, singing the blues, singing the blues." But then the chorus brings it home: "And I can guarantee you won't be let down I can guarantee you won't be let down."