

All Things New

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that as the Scriptures are read
and your Word is proclaimed,
we may hear with joy
what you say to us today.
Amen.

Background

When you read the book of Revelation in its entirety, you encounter basically two kinds of visions: visions that either threaten or assure. These visions increase in intensity and then rise to a crescendo in the last two chapters, culminating in this vision of our Great Future.

Truly our passage is one of the most beautiful scenes in all of the New Testament. We read the end of the book and we know that love wins. Not only the battle will be won, but the war will be won. Evil and death will be conquered and eliminated. God will restore all things and his initial plan for creation will be made complete. We not only are a new a creation, but all of creation will be restored. Or as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:21, "*the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay*" to "*obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*" The kingdom of the world will truly become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. (Rev. 11:15)

We and all creation have a future with hope. And the good news about our great future is that it helps us endure the present. But not only that, the future heartens us to work with God in the present. Little by little, by the grace of God, a little bit of heaven is brought to earth with Christ in us. The Lord's Prayer is answered that "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

One final background piece. Nearly every verse in our passage is a direct quote or paraphrase from the prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. I like how one commentator puts it: this "*chorus of echoes of Old Testament passages sounds a resounding 'yes' to the promises of God.*" This is the climax not only of Revelation, but of the whole story of creation that began in Genesis.

Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from...

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSVue)*

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “All Things New”

John the Revelator paints a beautiful picture with his words: I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The old heaven and the old earth had vanished. No longer will we or all creation be subjected to the ravages of time. The sea that symbolizes that all evil is no more. Our greatest thirst will be quenched with the living waters of life. We will be in perfect communion with God and one another. The good news is that we can enjoy a foretaste of that new creation even now in the present, as Paul says,

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” (2 Cor. 5:17)

In other words, Christ’s death and resurrection is the Big Bang that sent the New Creation into motion. And this New Creation will be fully revealed at the End of the Ages. We see that glorious future in Revelation:

“The Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,” like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. All blemishes are gone, wrinkles smoothed out. This New Jerusalem is both a place and a people.

Again, this is a poetic description of our future reality, but notice we don’t go up to heaven. Rather, from heaven, the New Jerusalem comes down to us. Heaven kisses and embraces earth.

This Royal City exists not merely for kings and queens, but all God’s people. It’s a healed community, where the worn down, broken down, and downtrodden are made whole by God’s mercy in Christ. There’s no forbidden fruit, only the Tree of Life whose leaves bring healing to the nations. The water of life runs through the Holy City. The presence and glory of God is our light and temple.

This Heavenly City is earthy: a lively place of joy, laughter, worship, holy communion, and meaningful tasks. Eden is restored and Jerusalem reconstructed. God lives among human beings. He will dwell among them and make his home with them. They shall be his people and He shall be our God. Gone are the feelings of separation and distance from God here on earth.

What happens when our God Immanuel is fully with us at the end of the ages?

*Sorrow flees.
Strife ceases.
Sin is overcome.
Darkness dispelled.
Death is swallowed up in victory.*

The old order has passed away.

No more funerals.

No positive tests.

No plagues and pandemics.

No more chronic pain.

No hurricanes or tornadoes.
No cancer, no chemo, no disease.
No more hostility.
No school shootings.
All these things are gone forever.

As the hymn says, *"Earth has no sorrow heaven cannot heal."*

Heaven is not only a homecoming, it's an exodus. We leave behind and are freed from all sin and bondage and hurt. And then God says, *"Behold, I am making all things new."* Everything.

Notice God doesn't say, "I am making all new things." No, "I am making all things new." This is about transformation. Transfiguration. The good news of heaven is that God is in the renewal business. God doesn't discard us. He chooses to grant us newness of life. Out of the destruction and leftover scraps, God recreates the new: nothing is wasted.

So write it down: These words are *"trustworthy and true."* Signed, sealed, and delivered by The Alpha and The Omega. The Beginning and The End. God is the Source and the Goal and everything in between. Or as Paul says in his letter to the Romans:

"For from him and through him and to him are all things."

Because of God's power and goodness, it's good as done. Or as Christ said on the cross,

"It is finished!"

Mission accomplished—even before it happened.

Things have come full circle. Creation started in the garden. Jesus died on a tree. The resurrected Christ appeared to Mary in the garden. The new creation begins in a garden. God's future plans will not be foiled, they will come to fruition.

But make no mistake Immanuel, heaven is for now, too. Each time Jesus has his way in us, each time we love our neighbor, we step a little more into the Kingdom of God here on earth, we become more and more by the grace of God fit for heaven. Pockets of heaven pop up on earth. When people encounter us, they get a whiff of heaven. You see, the gospel invitation is not simply, "get saved and go to heaven." It is so much more than that. As bible scholar NT Wright puts it, our heavenly call is this:

"follow this Man [Jesus] and you will find forgiveness for the past, hope for the future and purpose for the present."

Heaven enlivens us, not only once and for all, but in the here and now. Heaven isn't an escape but an engagement. An encounter with the Living God in the real world. Our task, in the strength of the Spirit of Christ, is to fit ourselves and our world for heaven. So spend time in Christ's presence and to let his holiness rub off on you and on others.

- Share and show the good news.
- Discover and display Christ in here and out there.

- Plant a tree or a rose garden.
- Work compassionately for justice and mercy.
- Create art.
- Love your family, your friends, enemies, and strangers.
- Feed the hungry, give a blanket and clothing to the naked.
- Free the oppressed.
- Mend what's broken.
- Call that estranged loved one.

Or as Presbyterian bible scholar and seminary President of Union Theological Seminary Brian Blount puts it in his commentary on Revelation:

"Work interdependently, negotiate strenuously, and compromise sincerely."

That's what heaven tastes like. This is the very business of heaven here on earth. All of this is working with God to make that new heaven and new earth, that will one day be fully manifest.

C.S. Lewis' in his last book of the *Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle*, Aslan the Lion leads Lucy, Edmond, Peter, Jill, and their friends out of the Old Narnia and into the New Narnia.

"Further up and further in," beckons Aslan. They couldn't go back to the Old Narnia—that one had a beginning and an end.

But they could go forward. All that mattered from the Old Narnia was now drawn up into the real Narnia through that Door that looked like a mouth. When they made it through the Door and stepped into the new Narnia, it was different and vaguely familiar. The old Narnia was the shadow of the real thing, the New Narnia. The new one was a deeper country than the old one. Every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. Then the Unicorn named Jewel summed up what everyone was feeling: He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried:

"I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for my whole life, though I never knew it until now...Bree hee hee! Come further up, come further in!"

Then Jewel shook his mane and sprang forward into a great gallop—a Unicorn's gallop, which in our world would have arrested him out of sight in a few moments. And then a strange thing happened. Everyone else began to run, and they found, to their astonishment, that they could keep up with him. Not only the Dogs and the Humans, but even the short-legged Dwarf Poggin. They didn't get winded. No discomfort. Motion without inertia. No boredom. Because they were awake. And filled with limitless good. Endless wonder. Lots of wonder.

*"Isn't it wonderful?" said Lucy.
Have you noticed you can't feel afraid, even if you want to?"*

The dream is ended, says Aslan, "This is the morning."

Then even the magical mind of C.S. Lewis is rendered speechless by the wonders of the New Narnia. And he concludes the book and the series with these beautiful words:

"And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.

All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: 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."

The End...and The Beginning.

Amen.

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