

I was reading this week about the last words people said before they died. General John Sedgwick was the highest-ranking Union officer killed during the Civil War. His famous last words were, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." Turned out he was not right. On a slightly more serious tone, Thomas Edison was the great inventor of our modern light bulbs, voice recorders, and motion pictures. He was a man who in his mind's eye could see so many things before they became reality. Right before his death, he said, "It's very beautiful." Wouldn't you love to know what he saw? More recently, Steve Jobs, one of the great inventors of our day and leader of Apple, said as he died, "Oh, wow. Oh, wow. Oh, wow." Dallas Willard is one of my favorite theologians. He couldn't speak for the last several days of his life, but his family was with him in the hospital room, and right before the end he mustered the strength to say, "Thank you." And then he took his final breath.

The Bible tells us "God has also set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We have a longing, a deep-seated desire to understand what eternity will be like, to peer into what the future holds and ideally let it provide hope and orientation for how we live our lives today. Today, as we wrap up our study on the book of Revelation, we are going to get the clearest and most complete picture anywhere in the Bible of what eternity is going to be like. As we read these final chapters in Revelation, it's like we are peering through a small crack in a wall and seeing what heaven will be like on the other side. What we read and what we see will leave us saying: "Oh, wow. Oh, wow. Oh, wow." "It's very beautiful." "Thank you." These are two of my most cherished, treasured, and loved chapters in the entire Bible, and I've been waiting with anticipation this entire series to teach these this lesson on what the Bible says about heaven. We are going to learn what heaven will be like, what we won't experience in heaven, and what we will experience in heaven.

There are three answers to the question of what heaven will be like. First, heaven will be like a beautiful garden. Listen to this word picture from Revelation 22:1-2:

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 twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

A river will run through the very center of heaven. Every ancient city around the world of any significance was built on or near water. If you want a thriving civilization, you must have a constant, reliable source of water. Our city is built on the White River. My family loves going to the river walk, especially in the summer. We love taking out-of-town guests to the river walk. How many of you have been down there? Almost everyone. How many of you want to drink that water? No one! That water is compromised. That water has weird mold and algae growing in it. That's not what the river in heaven will be like. It's a river of the water of life, as clear as crystal. This is the fulfillment of two Old Testament passages. First, the Garden of Eden is being restored. When humanity sinned, they were kicked out of the Garden; now, all humanity is being welcomed back in.

The second and even more prominent Old Testament passage is Ezekiel 47, where the prophet describes a day when a river will flow out from the temple and get deeper and wider until it reaches the Dead Sea, which, at 1,412 feet below sea level, is the lowest elevation on the planet. Water runs into it and there is nowhere for it to go, so it sits there until it evaporates. Because of that, the sea is filled with so many chemicals, toxins, and minerals that nothing can live in it. That's why it's called the Dead Sea. There is no life in those waters. But the prophet Ezekial said there would come a day when a river of life that flows from the temple will reach the Dead Sea, the one place on earth where nothing can live. When the river

touches it, “The salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows...so where the river flows everything will live” (Ezekiel 47:8-9). Realize what this symbolizes; think about the reality this points to. In heaven, every place that has been touched by death, every place that has been contaminated and become toxic will be rejuvenated, revitalized and restored. Heaven will be teeming with life!

Also, “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). In heaven there will be no hunger. There will be no need. There will be perpetual abundant supply. I love the phrase, “the leaves on the tree are for the healing of the nations.” The last few weeks we have been in peak fall splendor, with reds, yellows, oranges, and greens everywhere. We love the beauty of fall leaves, but there is nothing nourishing or substantive about them. In heaven, the leaves on the trees bring healing to the nations, which is the Bible's way of saying that not only will your personal needs be met in heaven in super-abundance, but all of society's needs will also be met in heaven in super-abundance. Not only will the battles that wage war inside of you be absent in heaven, but also the battles that wage war between people and nations will be absent. In heaven, everything that has ever been broken or compromised will be perfectly and entirely restored. It will be like a beautiful garden.

Second, heaven will be like a magnificent city. Listen to these descriptions from Revelation 21.

- “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).
- “It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel” (Revelation 21:11).
- “The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone...jasper...sapphire...emerald...ruby...topaz...turquoise” (Revelation 21:18-19).
- “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass” (Revelation 21:21).

All these images are meant to evoke breath-taking splendor, excitement, and awe. When you see a bride beautifully dressed for her husband, you can't look away—your eyes are glued to her because she's glowing! Think about all the precious stones. People pay thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of dollars for jewelry. A gemstone is exquisite, it's beautiful, but it's so small. Imagine the splendor of the most magnificent engagement ring you've ever seen, but instead of being an inch in diameter, it's the size of a skyscraper. We can't even fathom splendor like that. New York City is the largest city in America. It's called the concrete jungle. It's estimated that there are 1.68 trillion pounds of concrete in NYC. Now imagine every ounce of concrete replaced with pure gold. We can't even grasp the beauty. Revelation says that's what heaven will be like. But of course, we know that these are only pictures, pointing to a reality beyond themselves that is beyond our comprehension. CS Lewis reminds us:

All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolic attempt to express the inexpressible. Musical instruments are mentioned because for many people music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity. Crowns are mentioned to suggest the fact that those who are united with God in eternity share His splendor and power and joy. Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of Heaven (gold does not rust) and the preciousness of it.

All these descriptions of the eternal city, lovely as they are, point to something beyond themselves, and then tell us that heaven will be a magnificent, splendorous city. It's not simply a garden, where you sit in

serenity with yourself, your coffee, your journal, and Jesus. It's a city. Cities are hubs and epicenters of culture. Cities are where you go for Broadway musicals, world-class concerts, Michelin-rated restaurants. Look at this description of heaven: "The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into the city" (Revelation 21:24). The best elements from every culture in all of history will be in heaven. In heaven, the best food, the best music, the best art will be constantly paraded into and throughout the eternal city.

Heaven will not only be like a beautiful garden and a magnificent city, but heaven will also be like a glorious temple. Look at the way Revelation describes heaven: "The angel...measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long" (Revelation 21:15-16). In modern units of measurement, 12,000 stadia is 1,400 miles, so the eternal city is 1,400 miles long and 1,400 miles wide, which is big. It's roughly 2,000,000 square miles, comparable to the size of Australia or India. But the heavenly city isn't two dimensions; it's three. It's not only 1,400 miles long and 1,400 miles wide; it's 1,400 miles high. However, as with all the numbers in Revelation, you don't count them. You weigh them; you look at what they represent. Not only is heaven far bigger than we can comprehend, but heaven is also a cube, as wide as it is long and high. Here's why that really matters—in the entire Bible, there is only one other cube, one other building that is equally as long as it is wide and high. It's the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the temple, where the presence of God dwelt among his people. The Holy of Holies was 30 feet by 30 feet by 30 feet. The dwelling place of God was so sacred only one person, the high priest, could go in, and that only once a year. Instead of a heavenly city having a temple, the entire city is itself a temple and God's presence is everywhere! In heaven, you don't have to go to church. The entire thing is church. God's presence fills every square millimeter.

So that's what heaven looks like: a garden, a city, and a temple. Revelation also tells us what we won't experience in heaven. There will be no hardship or heartache. Ever since sin entered the world with the first humans, life has been characterized by difficulty, decay, and then ultimately death. But when heaven comes down, "God will wipe 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" (Revelation 21:4). Two of the most important words in the entire Bible are found in these verses: no more! In heaven, God will look at everything that has corrupted his creation and say, "No more." No more. No more hurricanes and tornadoes and earthquakes. No more wildfires and mudslides and tsunamis. No more lies, corruption and theft. No more war. No more fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. No more weapons of mass destruction. No more shootings in schools. No more adultery and affairs and divorce courts. No more addictions. No more anxiety and depression. No more abuse. No fathers will say, "I'm too busy." No mother will ever raise her voice in anger. No child will ever leave home and not come back. No more locks. No more alarms. No more racism. No more discrimination. No more doctor visits and hospitals. No more pharmacies and medications. No more cancer. No more death. No more tears. "The old order of things has passed away" Revelation 21:4). "No longer will there be any curse" (Revelation 22:3). When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they not only introduced the universe to sin, but they also subjected the universe to the second law of thermodynamics—increasing entropy, ever-increasing disorder—in both the spiritual and the physical realms. In heaven, the curse, the law of increasing disorder is reversed, and day after day, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, millennia after millennia, for all eternity, things will only ever get better and better and better!

In heaven there will be no more hardship or heartache, and also no more evil or darkness. In chapters 19-20 we saw that Satan and all his minions were thrown into the lake of fire; death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. All our enemies will be vanquished forever. No evil or darkness will ever enter the gates of heaven. Listen to these descriptions:

- "On no day will its gates ever be shut" (Revelation 21:25).
- "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27).

- “There will be no more night” (Revelation 22:5).

In heaven, we will have no enemies, so we will have no reason to protect ourselves. No closed gates. No thieves. No police. No armies. No contracts. No insurance. No lawyers. We will always be safe.

In heaven, there will be no impurities. Nothing will contaminate or corrupt God’s perfect world. Those who do not love God and his ways will not be let in. Only those who have had their clothes and their hearts washed pure by the blood of the lamb and who, through faith in him, have had their name written in the book of life. Finally, there will be no more darkness, which is a symbolic way of saying that all evil and all deception and everything that grows and spreads in the dark will be completely and totally absent forever.

That’s what we won’t experience in heaven. What’s even better is what we will experience in heaven. The first thing that stands out is that we will experience eternal life and rewards. “And they will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:5). “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done...Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life...and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:12,14,17). Look at these words: reign for ever and ever, my reward, the tree of life, the water of life. Everyone in heaven will live forever, will reign forever, and will receive eternal rewards forever.

Next, in heaven we will experience glorious introductions and reunions. Revelation 21:27 tells us heaven will be filled with, “those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” It won’t only be God and us in heaven; it will be God, us, and everyone who has ever believed in him. You’ll be able to go on a walk with Abraham and talk about his journey of faith, share a cup of coffee with Moses and talk about walking through the Red Sea, eat lunch with Mary and learn what it was like giving birth to the Messiah and raising Jesus as a boy. Elijah and Ester. Paul and Peter. Everyone you’ve read about in the Bible, you’ll meet them. Those throughout church history, the martyrs who gave their life for Christ, the church fathers who articulated the faith in the early centuries, the reformers, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa—you’ll meet them all. You’ll meet those you love, who have gone on before you. In heaven I will see my mom again, and I’ll be able to give her a hug and tell her thank you for raising me. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for teaching me to love Jesus. In heaven, I’ll be able to spend time with each of the children Keren and I lost to miscarriage. I’ll be able to kiss them and tell them I love them, that I’ve waited so long to meet them, but that I know they’ve been in good hands. If their name is in the book of life, and your name is in the book of life, you’ll be with them forever.

Those introductions and reunions will be so sweet. But as wonderful as they will be, it will be like holding a candle next to the sun compared to the wonder and splendor and glorious joy of being in the presence of God, which is really what heaven is all about!!

- “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’” (Revelation 21:3).
- “They will see his face” (Revelation 22:4).

This is the central promise of heaven—that we will be with God, we will be his people. His name will be on our hearts and we will see his face. Some people approach heaven like getting an invitation to a birthday party—they don’t want to miss out on all the fun, they are interested in the food and the games and the socializing, but they are only marginally interested in the person who is throwing the party. That’s not what heaven is about. All these wonderful things will be there, but the center of it all, the one who makes everything so wonderful in the first place is God, and we will be with him! You will see Jesus, the one who loved you so much he died for you. When he wraps you in his arms, you’ll be able to feel the scars on his brow up close, feel the nail holes in his hands, and then you’ll be able to look him in the eyes

and say thank you for tasting death so that I can live forever. Thank you for taking this sinner's place, so that I could reign with you for eternity.

This is what we are all longing for! CS Lewis said,

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country... I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.

This is what we were made for! Listen one more time to CS Lewis' words at the end of Chronicles of Narnia: "All their life in this world and all their adventures 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." That's what we are preparing for!

We called this study of Revelation "Beholding the Wonders of God." We will indeed behold his wonders for all eternity, because the Lamb that was slain has won the victory, and in his infinite grace and kindness has shared that victory with those he loves.