

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 5, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

REVELATION 21:1-2

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

“THERE’S A LAND THAT IS FAIRER THAN DAY”

When we think of heaven, especially in the language of the Apostle John who wrote about that beautiful place where Christians will finally reside, there is much misconception concerning the subject.

I was intrigued when I read what some children in Union City, Tennessee said. They were third graders, and they were asked by their Sunday School teacher to give their thoughts about heaven. Let me give you a few of their definitions. Here’s one — the third grader who wrote this one certainly was a diplomat. She said, “Heaven is where some very nice teachers and a very nice Sunday School superintendent will be found”! And here’s a third-grade theologian — “Heaven is where you will get everything you want, but if you want too much, you might not get there”! But let me give you my favorite of all of them — “Heaven should be the happiest part of my dead life”! Isn’t that great?!

Now, when God created us in His own image, one of the things that He created within us is a sense of eternity. Even when you study secular history, you become convinced that God planted in the heart of man a sense of the afterlife. I think, for example, of the civilization of Egypt four to five thousand years ago. When you go to Egypt and look at the pyramids, the thing that impresses people the most is not the amount of effort expended in building those awesome structures; although that in itself is one of the wonders of the world. In fact, engineers believe that at least one of the pyramids took 100,000 workers forty years to prepare this place of burial for a King. And you look at that amazing engineering feat; but what is really significant is that again this civilization, as all civilizations, had the conviction in their hearts that there is something after death. Their extensive preparation for the afterlife, as demonstrated by the artifacts found within those pyramids, is absolutely amazing. Indeed, every great culture the world has ever known has always given profound consideration to what happens to us after we die.

Today, of course, in our secular humanist culture, we have been invaded by existentialism, the philosophy of “the here and now.” It is almost as if we live for today and give no thought to what tomorrow is going to be like, let alone eternity.

I heard recently about a bumper sticker that probably fits a large segment of our society better than any that I could ever think of concerning the message of this morning. It said, “I want it all, and I want it now.” When you reflect on those words, don’t they, after all, reflect the popular culture of our day? Another bumper sticker which I’m sure you have all seen, says, “The

one who dies with the most toys wins.” Again, the reflection of a society that can think only of the here and now.

But when you study the Gospels, and especially the words of Jesus, you see that one of the two or three central themes of our Lord’s ministry was the afterlife. “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world (all those “toys” the world offers) and yet lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Now, as we get into Revelation 21 you will understand that the whole Book of Revelation is filled with symbolism, and so we have a lot of misconceptions about heaven itself. I remember as a boy reading about Christians in heaven wearing crowns on their head. I never liked to wear a cap anyway, and I used to think, “What a drag! Wearing one of those heavy old crowns forever — I don’t know what fun that would be!”

Yet as we come to it today, I want you to understand why they used that symbolism. It’s very simple. They simply did not have the words to express what heaven is really like.

You go up to a teenage boy who has fallen in love with a girl for the first time and say to him, “How’s it going?” He would look at you, and then look down at his feet, and stammer and say, “Well, gosh, good night, it’s...well — it’s super!” He just couldn’t describe it because it was a new experience that he simply could not articulate through human language. That’s exactly what John is trying to do as he endeavors to give us a picture of heaven.

Now there’s a word that I think will help you understand heaven better than any other, and that word is “relationships”. If we can grasp the significance of this one word, I think we will begin to understand what heaven is all about. John gives us three different dimensions of relationship that I want you to see.

1. He talks about a NEW relationship. He says that when we get to heaven, we’re going to experience a relationship that we’ve never experienced before in our life.

Notice the number of times the word “new” appears in Rev. 21:1-5. There is a new heaven and a new earth. John saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. He Who was seated on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” When John wants us to have a picture of heaven, he says that “first of all I want you to see it as a new relationship.” And he gives us two dimensions of this new relationship:

a. It will be a new place to live. This earth will pass away. Hebrews 11:16 says that those heroes of the faith who are described in this chapter, faithful souls who had served God so well here on earth, “were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore, God has prepared for them a city.” In other words, paradise is regained. In the Garden of Eden, when our first parents willfully sinned against God, they were cast out of their earthly paradise to endure hardship and sorrow. But in heaven there will be no cemeteries; no longer will the soil be moistened by the tears of people whose hearts have been broken; no longer will it be stained by shed blood. John says that this will be a new and glorious place in which to live forever.

b. It will be a new way to live. In heaven there will be a new type of living. John talks about a city — the new Jerusalem. And when we think of that city, we tend to think materialistically — the gates of pearl, the walls of jasper, the streets of gold. But that’s not what John is really trying to communicate to us. He’s trying to get us to see not a physical community, although there will be one; he’s wanting us to see a spiritual community. Do you know why it’s going to be such a “holy” city? It will be a holy city because there will be no sin there. Can you imagine a city with no sin? I’ll tell you this — the newspaper reporters who make it won’t have anything negative to report!

Why do we like to come together here as a community of faith? Because this is one place where we can worship God, sing praises to Him, pray together, get into God’s Word, and have our souls nourished — a blessed oasis in the desert of life. Heaven will be a thousand times better than this — no sorrow, no pain, no crime, no misunderstandings, no frustrations, no emotional problems; and we won’t have to go back into a world that is filled with all these horrible things. We’ll be able to stay there forever!

2. John talks about INTIMATE relationships. Look at verses 2 and 3. He says, “I saw the new Jerusalem,” (the community without sin), and he compares it to “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling place of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them, and be their God.’”

When John tried to describe this scene, the only thing he could compare it to was a marriage — the most wonderful relationship that human beings can experience. Heaven, he says, is like a great marriage; and when we think of the intimate relationship that John begins to describe, four things out of this passage begin to surface.

a. The first thing we think about is PREPARATION. You prepare for a wedding. It takes time, it takes planning, and it takes money! In Rev. 19:9 we read, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.” This is going to be the time when the bride, the church, is to be united eternally with Christ, the Bridegroom.

Before God spoke the universe into existence, in His sovereign plan, He said, “If man sins, I’m going to give him a Savior, My own dear Son.” Think of how God planned for our redemption — Jesus, in the fullness of time, coming down to the manger in Bethlehem. Think of the cost of this marriage. When you’ve been through the marriages of your five children, as we have, you can speak experientially about the cost involved, let me tell you! But think of the price Jesus paid for this marriage!

b. Another thing we think about is PURITY. In 1 John 3:2-3, the Apostle says, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as He is pure.” Now in Revelation John sees the believers in heaven clothed in white robes. That means that we’re going to be pure before God. Our shorter Catechism tells us (Question 37) that “believers are at their death made perfect in holiness.” Won’t that be wonderful! No more fighting with temptation; no more

struggle with sin. The old sinful nature will be a thing of the past! Sometimes we get weighted down by the spiritual warfare in this sinful old world. How good to know that that struggle will no longer be a part of our lives when we get to heaven!

c. The third word that I see here is the word PRESENCE. John says in verse 3 that “the dwelling of God is with men.” The K.J.V. says that “the tabernacle of God is with men.” That’s a great word — “tabernacle.” You see, the Tabernacle in the Old Testament, was symbolic of the presence of God. That’s where the Shekinah glory of God was to be found — in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. People went to the Tabernacle to get close to God. That Tabernacle was a great tent which could be taken down and then re-assembled; and it moved with the children of Israel as they travelled through the wilderness for 40 years from Egypt to the Promised Land. God was with them everywhere they went! Heaven will be our eternal Tabernacle — We will be in God’s nearer presence for evermore. What a blessed assurance!

d. The fourth word is PROMISE. In Leviticus 26:11-12 (KJV) God had promised, “I will set My tabernacle among you; and I will not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be My people.” In Jeremiah 31:33 God says, “I will be their God and they will be My people.” And in Ezekiel 37:27 God says again, “My tabernacle will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be My people.” An intimate relationship. One more thought —

3. When I see heaven as John describes it, I see an INDIVIDUAL relationship. I see a personal relationship. Notice verses 6 and 7, “He said to me” — God spoke to John personally — “He said to me, ‘It is done. To the one who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God, and he will be My son.’” Do you notice how God has become very personal in this relationship of heaven? Whenever we study His Word, we realize that the individual is very important to God. That is why in Luke 15 Jesus talks about the shepherd going after the one lost sheep; and about the father running to welcome home that one lost son. “One” is very important to God. We remember Augustine’s famous words. “God loves each one of us as if He had no other one to love.”

God says, “He who overcomes will inherit all this.” What does God give us individually? He gives us three things:

a. He gives us a salvation that is free. God gives us “the water of life without cost” (verse 6). You don’t deserve it, and you can’t earn it or pay for it. What do you have to do to get to heaven? Nothing except open your heart, and by faith, accept the free gift of eternal life that Christ offers to you. If we could earn our way to heaven, then why did Jesus have to die? Isaiah tells us, “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on HIM the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

b. He gives us strength that is fail-proof. In verse 7 John talks about “overcoming”. The one who gets to heaven is the one who “overcomes”. This word “overcome” is a key word

in the Book of Revelation where it appears fourteen times. Let me give you just one passage, Rev. 12:11, “And they overcame”. How did they overcome? “Because of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.” So, we overcome through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and through our public confession of Him. John catches a glimpse of these “overcomers” in heaven. God gives us strength that is fail-proof. And,

c. God gives us sonship that is forever. There we will be forever with the Lord. In verse 7 God says, “I will be his God, and he will be My son.”

I want to go there some day. Do you want to go too? Give me your attention for a minute before we pray.

Heaven is a very special subject to me. I have told you this story before, but let me tell it to you again. Two evenings before my father died at age 43, he called me to his bedside for what he knew would be his last talk with me. I was only eight, but that sacred conversation is as vivid to me today as it was 65 years ago. He told me how much he loved me; how much he had enjoyed the good times we had had together; and how he wished we could have had more years with each other. Then he asked me to take good care of my mother, and to meet him in heaven some day! And how I look forward to that glad reunion with him and with my mother, and the growing host of other friends who have died in the faith as “overcomers.”

I wonder this morning if there’s someone here, and you know in your heart that you are not ready to go to heaven; but you’ve got some friends, some loved ones who are going there, and you don’t want to miss it. It’s a beautiful place of relationships. The good news is that you can do what I did seven months after my Dad went home to be with the Lord — you can get ready by asking Jesus Christ to come into your life as your personal Savior and Lord. Have you done that? If not, would you do it right now?

As I close, let me give you the words of one of the most beautiful poems that Robert Browning ever wrote. He entitled it:

The Gathering Place

“Life changes all our thoughts of heaven;
At first we think of streets of gold,
Of gates of pearl and dazzling light,
Of shining wings and robes of white,
And things all strange to mortal sight.
But in the afterward of years
It is a more familiar place;
A home unhurt by sighs or tears,
Where waiteth many a well-known face.
With passing months it comes more near,
It grows more real day by day;
Not strange or cold, but very dear —
The glad homeland not far away;

Where none are sick, or poor, or lone,
The place where we shall find our own.
And as we think of all we knew
Who there have met to part no more,
Our longing hearts desire home, too;
With all the strife and trouble o'er.”

AMEN.