

A New Heaven and New Earth
Rev. 21:1-6
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Revelation. Whoa boy. Of all the books in the Bible, by far the one I get the most questions about is Revelation. What does it mean? Why is it so scary? My well-thought-out, theologically sound answer is usually, “Skip it.” I mean, seriously, trying to make sense of Revelation is almost impossible, mainly because it raises so many more questions than it does provide answers. Of all the sermons I’ve preached, this is only the fourth time I’ve preached on Revelation, and the other three times ended up being my last Sunday in that church, so we’ll see how this goes. Amy, don’t unpack your bags just yet.

Let me start with this question: Do you want to go to Heaven? I want to go to Heaven. Not any time soon, mind you, but when my time comes, I want to go to Heaven. I’ve dedicated my life to serving God, I try to be a good person and do the right things, and I hope that when I die I head north instead of south. My guess is that most of us have the same hope.

For centuries, that was the primary purpose of having faith: to get to Heaven. The driving question that motivated people to accept Jesus as their savior was, “What if you die tomorrow?” No one wanted to be left behind, so people made sure they did what was necessary in THIS world in order to make it to the next. I once visited with an elderly lady in the hospital. Although she was a member of my church, we didn’t see her that much, so I was surprised when I walked into her room and saw she had an open Bible on her lap. I said, “Well, it is nice to see you reading scripture.” She said, “Just cramming for my final exam.” We all want to go to Heaven.

In biblical times, the prevailing belief was that the world as God created it had three sections to it: Heaven was up there, earth was right here, and Hell was down there. So when the authors of the Bible talked about Heaven, it was directionally. Heaven was “up there” somewhere. That’s why when the first Russian astronaut went into space, he mocked Christians by saying, “I’ve been up to space and I did not find your God,” to which I want to say, “Hey, Vladimir, you’re looking in the wrong place.” You won’t find God up in space any more than you’ll find God shut up in an empty tomb. Nevertheless, for a long, long time, Heaven was thought of as a place “up there,” and the goal of believer was to get “up there.”

But this passage from Revelation tells us a different story. “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. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” I love that the Bible translation The Message says that the new heaven and new earth were “descending resplendent” out of Heaven. So, instead of us working to get up there, God sends Heaven down here to us, transforming the old heaven and old earth into something new, something resplendent.

Sounds pretty cool. But how will we know when it happens? Will we recognize the new heaven and new earth when it descends resplendent to us? Revelation gives us this clue: “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.” The Message says it this way: “I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!” So one of the ways we’ll know that God has sent the new heaven and new earth to us is that God will dwell among us. So when God comes to us, when God dwells among us and we are God’s people and God is with us, then we know the new heaven and the new earth is here. Boy, I

can't wait for that to happen! I sure look forward to that day when God comes down from Heaven and lives and walks among us. Doesn't that sound exciting? Can imagine that, God becoming one of us, God dwelling among us, God moving into our neighborhood and saying, "I'm home!" I wonder when that's going to happen.

Have you heard of this obscure, minor religious holy day called Christmas? The day we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, which means "God with us." Could it be that God has already moved into the neighborhood? Could it be that, through Jesus Christ, God HAS become one of us, HAS dwelt among us, HAS made his home with us? Could it be that if we've been looking up to Heaven, we've been looking in the wrong place? Could Heaven actually be here on earth already?

Well, if that's the case, it would be easy to miss it. Revelation tells us that when God comes to us God will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. And if we look around our world today, we see plenty of death and mourning and crying and pain. It's not getting any better. From conflicts in foreign lands to murder in our own streets, it's not getting better. From COVID cases escalating at an alarming rate to corrupt officials in our government, it's not getting any better. If Heaven is already here, why is there still mourning? If Heaven is already here, why is there still crying? If Heaven is already here, why is there still pain?

If you read this passage from Revelation a certain way, it makes it sound like God is going to do all the work, and all we have to do is sit back and wait for it to happen. God is going to take a big old eraser and wipe out the old heaven and earth and replace them with a new one and all we have to do is sit back and watch. It's like getting the oil changed in your car. You sit there, humming along to the radio, checking your texts, and they do all the work, flushing out the old and replacing it with the new. Check the spiritual dipstick...yep, God has made it all new! That's one way to see this story.

But I don't think that's how God works. Ever since Noah's time, God said, "I promise not to erase you and start over. I'm going to work with what I've got." God may regret that decision at times, but it was a promise, and God always keeps God's promises. A new heaven and a new earth. I don't think this is about replacement; I think it's about renewal. Because the God I worship is in the salvage business, and God loves us enough to believe that we – and this old earth – can be salvaged. God's not done with us yet. God's not ready to flush us away and start over. This isn't about replacement; it's about renewal.

So instead of just sitting back and waiting for God to send us a replacement heaven and earth, maybe God is calling us to work toward the renewal of our current heaven and earth, because Heaven is already here with us, hand-delivered by a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. Maybe God is saying to us, "Why are you looking up? What are you waiting for? I'm already here! Heaven is here!" Maybe our role as followers of Christ isn't to sit around waiting to get to Heaven, maybe our role is to show people the evidence that Heaven is already here among us, evidence that God has already moved into the neighborhood and Christ is alive.

That's easier said than done, isn't it? If we could all just get along, the world would be fixed any everyone would have a place to live and enough food to eat. But the possibility of we broken humans fixing this world seems utterly impossible, doesn't it? I struggle to think of anything we agree on these days. Wouldn't it be easier if God just swooped in, waved a magic wand, and fixed everything for us? Sure it would. But God didn't create us to rescue us. God created us and empowered us with free will to make the choices that would either bring life or

bring death. In many ways, we have chosen death. But that doesn't mean we're not capable of choosing life, of helping make Heaven real here on earth. God has given us that power!

While I was in seminary, my church in Indiana took a mission trip to North Carolina to help after a hurricane. We were assigned to one particular house and spent the week restoring this structure, replacing drywall and mopping floors and cleaning out the pool, making it habitable again for the mom and dad and son who lived there. At dinner our last night, the boy stood on a chair and said, "Thank you for fixing my home for me." God has moved into the neighborhood. Heaven is here!

When we do something that gives another person even a glimmer of hope, we show them that Heaven is here. When we wipe a tear from the eye of a neighbor by staying by their side during a difficult time, we show them Heaven is here. When we seek to alleviate the pain of a brother by helping to carry his burden, we show him Heaven is here. When we provide a balm for a grieving sister in mourning, we show her Heaven is here. We are not called to wait for replacement; we are called to act for renewal. We pray each Sunday, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." If we truly believe that God's kingdom is coming, then it is up to us to pave the way, one act of kindness and grace and peace at a time.

Don't get me wrong, I still want to go to Heaven when I die. But I'm not planning on doing that anytime soon, and I doubt you are, either. So the question I want to ask is not, "What if you die tomorrow?" The question I want to ask you is, "What if you live tomorrow?" What will you do to make Heaven known here on earth? How can we walk with others through their mourning and crying and pain to bring about renewal, to show them God is already there with them? What can we do to stand up and say, "No more!" No more senseless death. No more mothers crying. No more! No more injustice and corruption. No more putting our own agendas above the good of us all. No more!

We know there's something wrong with this world. We see and hear and read about the death and mourning and crying and pain every day. We can shake our head, make little noises of disgust, wondering why God isn't acting, wondering when God is finally going to get sick and tired of it all and come down here and do something about it. Or we can realize that God is already here, with us, within us, giving us the strength and the courage and the conviction to work it out. God is here, in the most mundane things like a loaf of bread and a cup of juice, calling us forward into the new heaven and new earth emerging around us. How are our lives pointing to the new things God is doing? How are we offering Heaven to those who feel like they are living in Hell? Are we just sitting back and waiting for God to act? Or do we believe that we have been called and gifted to do God's work? "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth." Immanuel. God is with us, within us. Heaven is here. So what will you do if you live tomorrow?