

The God of New Beginnings

Revelation 21:1-8

Introduction

While most realize that there is no substantial difference between December 31st and January 1st, there is a sense in which the start of a new year marks a time of expectation and excitement. We have a renewed resolve to eat better, exercise more, read our Bibles, volunteer more, and hopefully have a better year than the previous year. Some will criticize the optimism with which many people begin the new year with new goals and resolutions, but I think that our shared desire for something better, our hope for a new year and the potential that comes with it, is actually an echo of our longing for a new creation. Or, to put it another way, our longing for something better, our hope that often fills the start of a new year, is related to our desire for what the Scriptures call “heaven,” even when it is unconscious and goes unarticulated. All of us long for eternal life that is no longer filled with sadness and sorrow.

In his excellent book entitled *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn writes about this shared desire among humanity.

The sense that we will live forever somewhere has shaped every civilization in human history. Australian aborigines pictured Heaven as a distant island beyond the western horizon. The early Finns thought it was a distant island in the far away east. Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believed that they went to the sun or the moon after death. Native Americans believed that, in the afterlife, their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo.

The Gilgamesh epic, an ancient Babylonian legend, refers to a resting place of heroes and hints at a tree of life. In the pyramids of Egypt, the embalmed bodies had maps placed beside them as guides to the future world. The Romans believed that the righteous would picnic in the Elysian Fields, while their horses grazed nearby. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, said, "The day thou fearest as the last is the birthday of eternity."

Although these depictions of the afterlife differ, the unifying testimony of the human heart throughout history is belief in life after death. Anthropological evidence suggests that every culture has a God-given, innate sense of the eternal—that this world is not all there is.

So, this morning, as we contemplate a new year full of new opportunities and potential, as we embark on new goals with fresh hope, I don't want us to miss what these desires are actually pointing us to. While they excite us at the moment, they also point us beyond our present days to a deeper longing. A longing for a real new beginning...

Revelation 21:1-8

¹ Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ 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. ⁴ ‘He 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.’”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶ 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 without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Exposition

This morning’s passage describes the new beginning that God has promised for His people. This new beginning is comprised of a new heaven and new earth, which will no longer be full of the sorrow and sadness that evil and sin brought into the first heaven and first earth. This new beginning is God’s work. And unlike the first heaven and first earth, marred and corrupted through humanity’s rebellion, this new heaven and new earth will not be susceptible to corruption because it has been secured for us through Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 15, when he spoke of Jesus as the last Adam through whom comes life and salvation, unlike the first Adam, through which came death and judgment.

I. God’s Healing Presence in this New Beginning (Vv. 1-4)

Like so many other passages from the book of Revelation, we must understand something of the Old Testament to interpret and apply this morning’s passage correctly. In verses 1-4, John draws on the language of **Isaiah 65:17-25** to describe God’s healing presence in this new beginning. In **Isaiah 65**, the Sovereign Lord says, “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.” Other images from Isaiah 65 are peace contrary to nature, where we read that ²⁵ “The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” The image is one of peace and newness that we have never seen or experienced before.

In Revelation 21:1-4, John sees these things come to be as the result of God’s presence among His people. God Himself “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.” Death, sorrow, sadness, and pain are all part of the old order, which will pass away when God Himself dwells forever among His people. When John refers to there no longer being any “sea” in the new heavens and new earth, he is drawing upon the ancient view of the sea, which was often associated with dread and fear. We don’t tend to fear the sea because we have a vision of it that is informed by satellites and GPS, but for the ancient people, the sea seemed untamable. The new heavens and new earth will have no dread or fear in them. Those things that cause us anxiety, dread, and fear will be removed. We will dwell with God in perfect peace. As William Mounce explained it, “Abolished forever are the debilitating effects of sin. Death, mourning, crying, and pain are all part of the ‘old order of things’ that has now passed away. They belong to a previous order that has now become history.”

I love this idea of the previous order becoming history. I still remember planning trips to Petit Jean State Park in Morrilton, Arkansas. It was before GPS devices and smartphones. I would go to MapQuest and put in my address and my destination address. I would select my route; then I would print out several pages of instructions. I was telling my kids about this just the other day, and they kind of looked at me like I was crazy. Printing out a hard copy of directions sounds like ancient history. Almost like when my kids have asked me if “we have electricity” or “television” growing up. Things have so changed, technology has advanced so much, that it doesn’t even seem right that we once did things differently than we do now.

Now, can you picture this happening with things like “death and tears and pain?” There is a day coming when God will dwell with us in a new heavens and new earth and things like “death, mourning, crying, and pain” will simply be a matter of history? We will fellowship in the new heavens and new earth and we will look back on death, on the pain, on the sorrow, on the tears, and it will be history. It will no longer be a present reality. It will no longer be a part of our daily experience. We will dwell in a newness, we will enjoy a new beginning that Christ has secured for us.

But what difference does this future hope have for us today? John intended for this future dwelling with the Lord to encourage and strengthen believers to remain steadfast in trials. John aimed for His readers to be filled with hope and longing for the day when all that troubled them will be done away with. Hope in God’s healing presence in this glorious new beginning with a new heavens and a new earth is aimed at encouraging us in the midst of our pain and suffering, because we are reminded that for those who have placed their hope in Christ, pain and suffering will not last. Death does not get the last word over believers. The tears will stop. To quote Tim Keller, “Everything sad is going to come untrue, and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost.”

This is the difference that the presence of God makes!

II. **God’s Creating Power in this New Beginning** (V. 5)

Verse 5 teaches us about the absolute certainty of God’s creative power to make right all the wrongs in the world through a new beginning in the new heavens and new earth. John uses the present tense verb here, “making,” but it has a future-oriented prophetic feel to it. It means something like, “God will most certainly make all things news.”

Now, we have to acknowledge that in some very profound ways, this new beginning has already started. The new beginning started when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). Furthermore, as believers have been united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, we, too, are said to be participants in this new creation, this new beginning, even now. As Paul wrote, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor. 5:17).

Yet, even while this new beginning, this making new of all things has started in Christ, it will not be completed until after the final judgment, when the dead in Christ rise and inherit new, incorruptible bodies to dwell in a new heaven and new earth in the presence of God with all the saints. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 15, where he describes the death of death.

What does this mean for us now? Just like the seven churches to whom the book of Revelation was originally written, we are to hope in God and His salvation even as the world around us is passing away. We are to orient our minds around the priorities of God's kingdom, praying, "His kingdom come, His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We are to endure hardship and even the persecution that may come from following Jesus in this world. We hold fast to God's promise, hoping in His salvation.

Conclusion (Vv. 6-8)

To whom does this new beginning belong to? Who will enjoy God's healing presence and creative power in the new beginning of the new creation? It is the one who drinks of Christ's living water. It is the one who is victorious by faith. This is what John describes in verses 6-8. Those who place their trust in Christ, they are children of God. It is the children of God who will inherit the new heavens and new earth. And we become children by faith in Christ.

John speaks to this specifically in 1 John 5:1-5, where he writes,

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.

Now, at first glance, you might hear that passage and think that it says that our obedience is what makes us a child of God, but we must keep reading into verses 3-5, which say,

³ In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

So, "keeping the commands" is the result of our love for God, which is ultimately rooted in faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, we keep God's commands not to become his children but because we already are his children by faith in Jesus Christ. We must not get this order wrong. The victory that we need in order to overcome the world is faith in Jesus Christ. Then, as a result of this faith, which leads to us being born again, we keep God's commands out of love.

Our loving response to our Father's salvation in Christ is obedience, which is one of the key ways that God's children are differentiated from those in the world who are not God's children.

Thus, the one who will inherit the new heavens and new earth, the one who will live forever in this glorious bliss of heaven in the presence of God is the one who have placed their trust fully in Jesus and turned away from the rebellion of the world.

Have you placed your trust in Jesus? Will you inherit this glorious new beginning when Christ returns?