

“THE RIVER OF LIFE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 22:1-5

Introduction.

Heaven will be stunningly amazing. Heaven will be better than anything on earth and better than everything on earth. Heaven will be better than the very best thing on earth. Nothing here comes close to comparing to what it will be like there.

The sounds will be crisper, the colors sharper and more brilliant, the sights will be more spectacular, the smells will be more aromatic, the sensations will be euphoric. It will be sensory overload.

To experience the marvelous light of the glory and presence of God will be something like, all at once, tasting all the best tastes (ice cream, chocolate, strawberries, fine wine), hearing all the most beautiful sounds possible (ocean waves, Beethoven symphonies, a babies laugh, a kitten’s purr), feeling every good sensation possible (back rub, sitting down after standing for hours, silk on the skin, toes in a sandy beach), inhaling all the most wonderful scents at once (lavender and lilacs in spring, Chanel No. 5, fresh bread baking), and seeing all the most beautiful created things possible (Aurora Borealis, a murmuration of starlings, the Milky Way on a clear night, the Grand Tetons, a lightning storm). Yet heaven is better than all of this multiplied a thousand times, but heaven is at least all of this” (this idea inspired by a Joshua Gibbs blog post).

It will be a purity and beauty of experience that no human words can convey. All the symbols John uses in Revelation are meant to communicate to us that what’s in heaven is beyond what mere symbols can capture. It will be above and beyond anything we could ask or imagine.

It will be better even than the Garden of Eden which is being paralleled in John’s vision. The river and the trees, the abundance, the beauty, the intimacy with God Himself, all of that it turns out was a prophetic vision anticipating an even greater future.

What the first Adam lost by his sin, the second Adam recovered by His obedience. That wonderful paradise lost is regained in heaven. This final vision restores the very first vision of unbroken, idyllic fellowship between God and man. The end is far better than the beginning.

The River of Life, vs. 1.

John’s vision closely parallels the vision of Ezekiel 47, of a great river flowing from the threshold of the temple, a river lined with countless fruit trees.

The river is called the river of life. As death characterized life on earth, life will characterize life in heaven. And that life flows from the very throne of God. God is the author and giver and sustainer of life.

There is no more basic human need than water. Life depends on it. We can go weeks without food, but only days without water. We don't realize how desperately dependent on water we are because of the abundance of water.

This river is the consummation of all God's sustaining grace.

Revelation is the new Genesis, the old has passed away and the new has come, a new world, a new creation. The first chapter of the Bible is about how God made the world, the last chapter of the Bible is about how God remade it.

Psalm 46:4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

The Tree of Life, vs. 2.

From the river of life we turn to the tree of life. This is the tree that Adam and Eve were barred from eating.

The one tree in the garden is replaced by a multitude of trees in heaven, everything is multiplied, everything is superlative, greater, more, better.

Eden is back, paradise is regained and more fruitful and verdant (lush and luxuriant) than ever. A new and better Eden. This tree will yield twelve kinds of fruit all the time and all at the same time.

There will be unending benefits and blessings, unending refreshment and enjoyment of fellowship with God and each other.

We have never seen a tree that produces twelve kinds of fruit, nor have we ever seen a tree that bears fruit every month all year long. What a stunning symbol of the abundance and generosity and accessibility and variety of heaven.

We have never seen such a tree but do you know you can taste something of it?

Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who ...

2 ... delight[s] is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

Why is healing mentioned when there is no sickness (see Ezekiel 47:12)?

We are given a symbol that should not be pressed literally. John is using earthly language of an earthly reality to describe eternal realities beyond his grasp. This is a picture of the complete absence of physical or spiritual or emotional needs. All is healed, all is well, for everyone.

The far reaching effects of the death of Christ is so great sin and all its effects are completely abolished. Eternal life is perpetually available, every sin eternally erased and every ill effect completely cured.

There will be no disease or sickness, no bitterness or division, no racism, no warfare, no hate, no strife.

The Throne of God, vs. 3-5.

John has saved the best for last. The last thing he describes about heaven is better than the walls of jasper or the gates of pearl or the streets of gold or the river and trees of life.

John 17:3 This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

The center of the new heavens and new earth is one throne. From His throne God pours out every blessing. And the greatest blessing of all is Himself seen in the face of Jesus.

There are only two ways to see Jesus. What are they? By faith and by sight. Those who don't see Him by faith cannot and will not see Him by sight. Jesus desires that we see Him by sight and He prays for that:

John 17:24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me.

For us on earth the only way we can "see" or know Jesus is through Scripture. The more we know Scripture the more we know Jesus. This knowledge is transforming (II Corinthians 3:18) and conforming (Romans 8:29).

In heaven we shall see Him as He is, we will see visually and intellectually, with understanding. We will be like Jesus because we shall see Him as He really is.

This is why we shouldn't have pictures of Jesus. Christ's glory transcends any possible depiction of Him on earth and therefore, any picture of Jesus that we see is false, it's a lie, it actually distracts us from seeing Jesus as He truly is.

They will see His face.

I want to spend the remaining time we have on the best part of John's vision, seeing God face to face. Some old saints have called this the beatific vision. This is the vision beyond all visions, this is the best vision, the summum bonum, the highest good, the ultimate goal.

Some think that Moses and Paul were granted brief glimpses of this beatific vision on earth and that it's what Peter, James and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration.

“Christ clothed Himself with heavenly glory for a short time. His transfiguration did not altogether enable His disciples to see Christ as He now is in heaven, but gave them a taste of the boundless glory such as they were able to comprehend. This was not a complete exhibition of the heavenly glory of Christ, but under symbols which were adapted to the capacity of the flesh, He enabled them to taste in part what could not be fully comprehended” (John Calvin).

So what will we actually see in heaven?

“None sees God the Father immediately, who is the King eternal, immortal, invisible. Christ is the image of that invisible God, by which he is seen by all elect creatures. The only-begotten Son that is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him, and manifested him. None has ever immediately seen the Father, but the Son; and none else sees the Father any other way, than by the Son's revealing him” (Jonathan Edwards).

We will see the human face of Jesus. Jesus took on our humanity forever. He added our humanity to His deity. We will see the nail scars in His hands and feet, the signs of the greatest love. The heaven of heaven will be to gaze upon Jesus and to see God in Him.

On earth we see imperfectly and only by faith. In heaven we will not see by faith, but by sight. We will be pulled into the Father's delight in the Son and the Son's delight of the Father. Heaven will be the happiest, place the most joy filled place.

Jonathan Edwards calls it a happifying sight, where we will be fully alive in the fullest sense of the word. And we will be made into how we were created to be, glorifying God in the very presence of His glory and enjoying Him forever.

We will eternally grow into this intimate knowledge of God. It can never become boring because it cannot become exhausted, the end will never be reached.

This gazing on God shall never cease to amaze us and satisfy us. God will ever and always be the source of all our hearts desire. This vision will be endlessly dynamic, new, fresh, vibrant, an infinite series of beginnings with no ending.

Though perfect we will grow in perfection, as Christ though perfect, was made perfect in His experiences on earth. The fountain of God's joy and love and beauty will never cease to flow and our discovery of these things will never cease or be exhausted. It would be like drinking the ocean.

We will always be perfectly satisfied in heaven, we will always be full, but our capacity for satisfaction will always be growing in heaven. The more we learn and know about God, the greater will be our ability to receive more from Him and enjoy Him more. Our increasing enjoyment will never cease (see Jonathan Edwards).

In the final lines of the final canto of Dante's Divine Comedy, he captures the ultimate indescribable quality of the Vision: "Thus my mind, all rapt, was gazing, fixed still and intent, and ever enkindled with gazing. At that light one becomes such that it is impossible for him ever to consent that he should turn from it to another sight."

Implications and Application.

The vision of Revelation is meant to give persecuted and suffering Christians an assurance of God's final victory, that He has a plan and His final purposes will be accomplished. But that's not all.

The sun rises and sets every day, it comes and it goes. For thousands of years, relentlessly the same. It is meant to create a hunger and thirst for the true light, the light that never departs. God will satisfy us with a light beyond all earthly light, the light of His glory, brilliant beyond all description.

This vision should stir longings in our souls. This vision should stir holy dissatisfactions with anything on earth, even the best of things on earth. This vision should stir up desires like the Psalmist.

Psalm 27:4 One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

Psalm 42:1-2 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Psalm 63:1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

This vision should make us dissatisfied with temporal, trivial trinkets of earth and yearn for the true treasures of heaven.

God has created our souls to soar to much greater heights, to not be drawn to poor counterfeits and impotent idols and temporary pleasures. All the beauties and joys of created things are only meant to draw our souls upward to the creator. He is the supreme pleasure and supreme desire.

I Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

II Corinthians 3:18 ... with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord ...

I John 3:2-3 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

I Corinthians 2:9 What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

Prayer: Holy Father, we have just barely dipped our toes in the river of your delights and pleasures. There are depths here we know nothing of but thank You for this stunning vision of the glory of God and the majesty of Christ. Draw us further up and further in through delight in your Word and the refreshing wind of your Spirit. Keep us faithful to the end that we might receive your reward, the inheritance that awaits us in glory. For Jesus' sake. Amen.