

# 13. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS OUR DESTINATION

*Then the king will say to those on his right: You who my Father has blessed, come and inherit the kingship prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34).*

## **Is heaven really our home?**

It's unbelievable, but most Christians don't have much of an idea about where they are going. They don't have clarity about what the Bible teaches as their destination. Some Bible translations give the wrong impression, especially those that we call paraphrases. It is not good to be too literal when translating the Bible but on the other end of the spectrum, we have the paraphrased versions, for example, The Message or The Living Bible, in which the interpretation is overly influenced by modern culture. The result is like a film made about a former era, but it all looks very 21st century. There is one clear destination for the redeemed, and that is 'to be with the Lord'.

## **Where are we going?**

Common Christian terminology would have it that when we die, we go to heaven, and that's it. When reading Hebrews in the Living Bible, I noticed several references to heaven which seemed unnatural (Heb 10:34, 11:10, 14). On looking up the Greek, I found no heaven mentioned; rather, it spoke of a city or country that the faithful were looking forward to.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, he told the criminal who expressed faith in him that he would be with him in paradise that very day (Lk 23:43). Paradise is mentioned three times in the New Testament. Paul said he was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2), which he defined as paradise (verse 4). Jesus promised those who

conquer that he would give them the right to eat from the tree of life that is in God's paradise (Rev 2:7).

When Christians die, they go to be with the Lord. Paul said he couldn't decide between two possibilities; to continue living and serve God here, or to depart and be with Christ which is far better (Php 1:23). He also said that if the earthly tent we live in is torn down, we have a building in heaven that comes from God, an eternal house not built by human hands (2 Cor 5:1). Many interpret this as referring to the resurrection body that we will receive at Jesus' return. Others feel that, as the text says, we already have this building from God, it refers not to the resurrection body, but to the home of the redeemed in heaven (New Jerusalem). Jesus said that his Father's house had many rooms and he was going to prepare a place for his disciples (Jn 14:2). Paul said that as part of our salvation in Christ, we have been raised up with him and seated with him in heaven (Eph 2:6). He also said that the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother (Gal 4:26). The book of Hebrews has a lot to say about this city. God has prepared a city for people of faith (11:16). Christians have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), so they are looking for the city that is to come (13:14). Then in Revelation John sees this city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It is a glorious place, and John sees it coming down from heaven to earth.

We can conclude from these verses that the holy city is the eternal home that God has prepared for us. Our spirits enter it at death so that we are not left wandering naked in space. The resurrection body doesn't come until later when Jesus returns.

## **The intermediary state - 'heaven'**

The 'intermediate state' is not a biblical term, but it refers to the spiritual state of believers between death and the Messiah's return to Earth. The bodies of dead Christians decay in the grave or are burned up by cremation. They exist as human spirits or souls only. Paul says that he would prefer to be absent from the body and home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). It is a temporary stopover, not the final state of bliss and glorification. The martyrs John saw in Rev 6:9-11 were there as disembodied spirits or souls. They ask how long it will be before God

judges the wicked who remain on the earth. They are looking forward to something and are told to wait until the number of their fellow servants or brothers is complete. John sees them again in Rev 20:4, where they are now resurrected and will reign with the Messiah for 1000 years. Their glorification is finally complete.

Regarding heaven as the final destination of the righteous is unfortunate because it doesn't give scope to the imagination as the millennium does. According to Paul, the Christian hope is our adoption as sons; the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23), which will materialize at the coming of the Messiah. Scripture is clear that we're already God's children (Jn 1:12, 1 Jn 3:2, Rom 8:15-16, Gal 3:26, 4:4-7), but Paul says that we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23). We are God's children already but what we will be has not yet been revealed. This parallels the teaching that we are currently heirs; our glorification is yet to come. So our hope should be in the resurrection, the wedding supper of the Lamb, life in New Jerusalem, and ruling the Earth during the Messianic reign.

Jesus said he was going away to prepare a place for us, and he'd come back to get us so that we might be with him. It is a mistake to think that Jesus is coming back to Earth for a momentary visit. If Christians go to be with the Lord at death, why does Jesus need to come back to Earth to get us? Why couldn't the resurrection take place in heaven? Is there anything left in the grave that will form part of a resurrected person? The resurrection body is spiritual, but as Jesus showed us, he could appear on earth with a flesh and bone body (Lk 24:39). God has planned for us to have new bodies through resurrection because man is not complete without a body, and resurrection will make him whole again. The inhabitants of heaven don't have bodies, bodies are designed for living on Earth. That is why, when Jesus returns, he'll give us our resurrection bodies, so that we can rule over a renewed Earth, and God will make his home among men and dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God (Rev 21:3).

Our earthly tent is temporary; the building from God is permanent. In the Father's house, a city, there are many places that Jesus has prepared for us. But what is it really? The jewels, pearls, and streets of

gold are symbolic, as are the tree of life and the river of life. They are symbolic of the glory and immortality we'll enjoy, but our actual mode of existence at that time has not been revealed. No mind can conceive what God has prepared for those who love him. Heaven isn't just pie in the sky.

## **The Great Tribulation – the final week**

The first three and a half years of this horrendous 'week' are described by the first four seals, trumpets, and bowls. One-quarter of the world's population will be killed during this time of warfare, famine, and most probably, radioactive contamination. The final world empire will rule the world as a coalition of nations, devouring the whole world, trampling it down, and crushing it (Dan 7:23). The smoke and nuclear contamination resulting from these wars will cause much devastation and suffering. The Antichrist will put down three other world leaders and emerge as a powerful dictator. He'll make a binding agreement with many (nations or the majority in Israel) for seven years, but then in the middle of that time, he will break it. C. F. Keil in his commentary on Daniel interprets this as: That ungodly prince shall impose on the mass of the people a strong covenant that they should follow him and give themselves to him as their God.

In the second half of the seven-year tribulation, with the help of his public affairs officer, the False Prophet, he'll set himself up as God, the only person to be worshipped. Through a campaign of blasphemy, political injustice, social harassment, economic deprivation and murder, he'll put an end to organized religion, including Christianity and Judaism. He'll oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and object of worship. He'll sit down in God's sanctuary and declare that he alone is God (2 Thess 2:4). But there will be political opposition. His empire is described as a mixture of iron and clay, a metaphor for instability. The 'king of the South' (probably a Muslim coalition led by Egypt) will rebel, and the 'king of the North' (probably another Muslim coalition led by Turkiye) will storm out against him. The Antichrist will invade many countries, including Israel, then reports from the East and the North (beyond the Euphrates) will alarm him. He'll finally come to his end near Jerusalem at the coming of the Messiah. Together with the False Prophet, he'll be captured and consigned directly to hell. The fifth and sixth trumpets

and bowls relate to this period. The locusts and horses that they describe are symbolic of modern warfare – bombs, missiles, and tanks. The number of troops involved in the final battle of Armageddon is stated to be 200 million, when a further one-third of mankind is killed.

## **The Church during the Great Tribulation**

Some people claim that the church is not mentioned on Earth during the Great Tribulation, thus supporting their theory that the rapture of the saints occurs before the tribulation begins. Christians need to know about future events and what to expect, whether they'll experience the horrific years of the Great Tribulation. Surely one of the reasons why God gave us the book of Revelation is to prepare the Church for this time of persecution and martyrdom. It was specifically written to *God's servants in the churches*, to show them what must surely take place (Rev 1:1). Whenever we see the word 'saints' (12 times), or 'servants of God' (10), or 'those who bear testimony to Jesus' (9), it is Christians who are in focus. Many verses speak of Christians being persecuted and martyred throughout the Great Tribulation and their need for endurance (Rev 1:9, 6:9-11, 7:3, 12:17, 13:7-10, 14:12, 16:6, 17:6, 18:20, 24, 20:4). The presence of Christians during this time is evidence that the resurrection of the righteous and the rapture of the living will not occur until the day of the Lord, the day Jesus returns.

Daniel makes several clear statements about the distant future (Dan 8:26). He was told that the Antichrist would speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Most High. They'll be given into his control for three and a half years (7:25), destroying mighty men and the holy people (8:24). However, after the three and a half years, when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things will conclude (12:7).

Paul seems to have this text in mind when he tells the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord will not come unless the rebellion takes place first and the man of sin (the Antichrist), who is destined for destruction, is revealed (2 Thess 2:3). The Antichrist will be an atheist who honors military might. He'll plunge the world into a war so horrific that a third of the world's population will be slain (Rev 9:18). The rebellion from the East and the North can be identified with the 200 million strong army released at the Euphrates (Rev 9:13-16) and culminating in

Armageddon at the Lord's return when the Antichrist will come to his end. There will be continuous war during his reign, but when the Messiah comes, he'll be killed by a word from his mouth.

No mention is made of people becoming believers during the tribulation, but that doesn't mean it won't occur. With that in mind, let's look at twenty passages that indicate that the Church will pass through the Great Tribulation. Some of them refer to martyrs whose souls are in heaven, but all are evidence of the presence of the Church on Earth during the Great Tribulation.

**Rev 6:9** When (the Lamb) removed the fifth seal, I (John) saw under the altar the souls of *those who had been slain for speaking God's word and for the witness they had borne.*

The inference is that the martyrs had died following the opening of the first four seals.

**6:11** Each of them was given a white robe and told to rest a little until the number of their brothers was completed, their fellow servants who would be killed as they had been.

**7:3** Don't spoil the land, the sea, or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of *the servants of our God.*

God's servants in Revelation (1:1, 2:20, 6:11, 7:3, 10:7, 11:18, 19:2, 5, 22:3, 6) always refers to Christians.

The 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel are on earth and at first sight would appear to be literal Israel, but it is a symbolic number ( $12^2 \times 1000$ ) for the totality of the Church. If you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:29).

**7:9, 14** After this I saw a great crowd that no one could count. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language and were standing in front of the throne and the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches. ... These are people who are coming out of the Great Tribulation. They've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

This innumerable number of saints are from every nation. Those dressed in white linen in Revelation (3:4, 4:4, 6:11, 7:9, 13-14, 19:8, 14) always refers to Christians. They are before God's throne in

heaven because they died as Christian martyrs during the Great Tribulation.

**8:3** (Another angel) was given a much incense to offer on the gold altar before the throne, along with the prayers of all *the saints*.

These prayers are prayed by the suffering saints on earth (cf. 5:8) and the martyrs, asking how long it will be before God judges and takes revenge on those living on earth who shed their blood (6:10).

**9:4** They were told not to spoil any grass, bushes, or trees, but only the people who don't have God's seal on their foreheads.

The saints who were sealed in chapter 7 are not to be harmed.

**11:8** Their dead bodies will lie in the plaza of the great city that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

The two witnesses are Messianic Christians – Jewish believers, of whom there were an estimated 350,000 adherents in the world in 2012 (Wikipedia).

**11:13** At that time, there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city (Jerusalem) collapsed, 7,000 people were killed, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Giving glory to God suggests repentance. Their response contrasts with that of the unrepentant unbelievers who curse God (Rev 16:9, 11, 21). However, their mass conversion awaits the Messiah's arrival, when he pours out his Spirit on them (Zech 12:10).

**12:17** The dragon was enraged at the woman (Israel) and went away to do battle against her other children, those who keep God's commands and bear witness to Jesus.

**13:7** (The Antichrist) was allowed to wage war against the saints and to conquer them.

**13:10** If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity he'll go. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he'll be killed. This calls for endurance and faith on the saints' part.

Cf. Jer 15:2. God's people get caught up in God's judgments. The Antichrist will be given power to wage war on the saints, but the age

will soon end, when the saints will be resurrected. So, they are encouraged to be faithful, and endure, and not submit to the Antichrist.

**14:1** Then I (John) saw the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion with 144,000 people. They had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

Mount Zion is here equivalent to the New Jerusalem. The Church sings a new song that nobody can learn except those who have been redeemed from the Earth. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

**14:12-13** This requires endurance from the saints, those who keep God's commands and maintain their faith in Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven saying: Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on!

Another plea to the Church to endure during the Great Tribulation. The severity of the persecution under the Antichrist is great, he wages war against the saints and conquers them (Rev 13:7). The blessing is pronounced upon those who are about to suffer martyrdom. They shouldn't fear because they'll be blessed for surrendering their lives to the Lord.

**14:16** The one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the Earth, and the Earth was harvested.

This picture of a grain harvest is the closest we get in Revelation to a description of the resurrection and rapture of the Church. Cf. Mk 4:29 where harvesting the grain with a sickle is a picture of the ingathering of the righteous. The harvest comes just before the seven bowls of wrath are poured out.

**15:2** I (John) saw what looked like a glassy sea mixed with fire, and standing beside the sea were those who had conquered the beast, its image, and the number of its name, holding God's harps in their hands.

**16:6** God gave those who worshiped the Antichrist blood to drink as they deserved because they spilled the blood of saints and prophets.

**16:15** Listen! I'll come like a thief. Blessed is the person who stays alert and dressed so as not to go naked and be seen exposed.

Christians are exhorted to be ready. If they are not clothed in Christ's provision of righteousness, their deficient character will be evident: wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:17).

**17:6** I (John) saw that the woman (Babylon) was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore witness to Jesus.

**18:20** Rejoice over (Babylon) you inhabitants of heaven, saints, apostles, and prophets, for God has taken vengeance on her for you.

God has judged Babylon for the way she treated the Church.

**18:24** The blood of prophets, saints, and all who had been slain on the Earth was found in her (Babylon).

The woman who is guilty of the murder of all the Christians is defined as the great city that rules over the kings of the Earth. It applies primarily to Antichrist's capital city, but it involves all the great cities of Antichrist's empire that are bound together by politics, commerce, and entertainment.

**20:4b** I (John) saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because they testified about Jesus and preached God's word. They came to life and reigned with the Messiah for a thousand years.

This is the first resurrection, the resurrection of the righteous, and presumably the resurrection of the entire Church.

## **Two resurrections**

The Nicene Creed (revised version 381) says:

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. ... we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen!

When we harmonize the biblical teaching, we find that there are two resurrections, one of the righteous and one of the wicked. The righteous are resurrected at the beginning of the messianic reign, while the wicked are resurrected and judged at the end of it. Jesus said those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage. And since they share in the

resurrection, they are God's children (Lk 20:35-36). 'That age' and references to 'the coming age' (Mt 12:32, Mk 10:30, Lk 18:30, Eph 1:21, 2:7) are interpreted by the BAG Greek Lexicon as the Messianic age. References to the first resurrection are numerous, and in the following verses those resurrected are designated as the elect, the righteous, and those who are worthy (Mt 24:30-31, Lk 14:14, Jn 5:29, 11:25, 1 Cor 15:22-23, 2 Cor 4:14, Phil 3:20-21, 1 Thess 4:15-17, Rev 20:4-6). Jesus was the first person to be resurrected. Lazarus was brought back to life, but strictly speaking, not resurrected, because he died again, and resurrected people are immortal. Many deceased saints came to life and appeared to many people after Jesus' resurrection (Mt 27:52-53) as a sign of what was to come, but they weren't resurrected with immortal bodies. Scripture makes it clear that there are two resurrections. Those who are beheaded by the Antichrist (and presumably all the righteous saints) come to life and reign with Christ for a 1000 years; the first resurrection. The rest of the dead don't come to life until the 1000 years are ended (Rev 20:4b-5).

## **The rapture**

The living saints are raptured to meet the Lord in the air at the second coming, Jesus's return to Earth. It isn't done secretly; it's a very loud and brilliant display of power and glory. There will be a loud roar like a waterfall (Ezek 43:2, Rev 1:15) and a loud trumpet blast (1 Thess 4:15). The angels will gather the elect from one end of the Earth to another. It'll happen very quickly, in the blink of an eye; it is not a drawn-out affair. Deceased saints are raised first, then the living saints are changed (1 Cor 15:52).

Christians will not be left in darkness so that the Day of the Lord will surprise them like a thief (1 Thess 5:4). In other words, Christ's return is not imminent. They'll be watching for the signs and will be ready for whatever eventuates. They won't be confused about it. They'll know that the coming of the Lord and their being gathered to him won't happen unless the rebellion takes place first and the Antichrist is revealed (2 Thess 2:1-3). He'll oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and object of worship and will set himself up in the Jewish temple (Mt 24:15, 2 Thess 2:4) proclaiming himself to be God. John is given a measuring rod and told to measure God's temple (Rev

11:1-2), a confirmation that a third temple will be built in Jerusalem in the last days.

The second coming is not imminent, because the rebellion hasn't happened yet. Antichrist will appear on the scene at least seven years before Christ returns, and he'll set himself up in the temple three and half years before he returns. So, Christians should be on the lookout for the rise of the Antichrist and his worldwide empire. But their hope is in the second coming of Christ, the rapture, and the millennial reign on Earth. Nobody knows the day when the Messiah will return, but Paul said he won't return before the rebellion of humanity against God occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess 2:3). God has not left his people in the dark about this. His coming won't surprise them. The Bible leaves no room for a secret rapture.

There is no clear teaching in the NT about people being saved after the resurrection and rapture. Only one resurrection of the righteous is mentioned. In the parable of the virgins, the time came when the door was shut. Paul makes it clear that there is a certain date when the full number of Christians is complete, and that is when the Lord Jesus returns. After that moment, the door is closed to the monarchy. The full number of saints will have come in, and no others will be able to reign with Christ during his reign on Earth.

However, Israel will be saved after the Lord's arrival. Stubbornness has come to part of Israel until the full number of the elect from the nations has come to faith, then all Israel will be saved as it is written: The deliverer will come from Zion, and he'll turn godlessness away from Jacob (Rom 11:25-26). When the Spirit is poured out on all Israel, they'll be saved, but too late to be included in the resurrection, and too late to be a part of the monarchy. Their role in the kingdom age is a different one.

1. Church age continues until the age of grace finishes
2. Jesus returns and the Church is resurrected and raptured
3. Israel is saved and reinstated as God's people on Earth
4. The Church rules the world with the Messiah from New Jerusalem.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God would be taken away from the Jews and given to a people producing

its fruits (Mt 21:43). Israel would still be saved, but they would miss out on the kingship. They'll be saved when the Messiah comes *to Zion* to save Israel from its enemies (Isa 52:8-10). Then Paul says, he'll come *from Zion* and banish ungodliness from Jacob (Rom 11:26). When Jesus pardons Israel for its sin of unbelief in him, he'll renew his covenant with them, a prerequisite for them being renewed as God's people among the nations.

## **Christians won't suffer God's wrath**

We are called to suffer for Christ (Acts 14:22, Phil 1:29), but not to suffer God's wrath. God's seal on the foreheads of believers (Rev 7:3) is God's stamp of ownership, guaranteeing their eternal security, but it doesn't guarantee protection from persecution or martyrdom. Death will be transient because death has been conquered. Christians are not appointed to suffer wrath, but to experience salvation. Jesus will rescue them from the coming wrath, but the Church will have to pass through the Great Tribulation. Jesus' prayer for his disciples is not that God would take them out of the world (as in a pretribulation rapture) but that he'd protect them from the evil one (Jn 17:15). There are thousands of Christian martyrs every year. They lose their lives for Christ, but they gain eternal life. They don't suffer God's wrath; there is no condemnation or punishment for those who are in Christ Jesus. The seal is put on God's servants so that they wouldn't be affected by the calamities that follow the opening of the seals. Then, after the fifth trumpet, the locusts are told not to harm those who have God's seal (Rev 9:4). And after the first bowl of wrath is poured out, painful sores break out *only* on people who have the mark of the beast (Rev 16:2).

## **The millennium**

The NT gives little detail about the Messiah's reign, but Revelation 20 repeats six times that it will last 1000 years and clearly states that the righteous will reign with Christ during that time. 1000 years may be symbolic for a long time, but that doesn't mean it is not literal, and as we have no evidence for it being more or less, we should retain Scripture's terminology. It does not mean forever for several reasons. Jesus said heaven and Earth would pass away, but his words would never pass away, Paul prophesied that when the end comes, Christ will hand the kingdom over to God the Father, and at the last judgment,

heaven and Earth flee from God's presence without leaving a trace. That leaves the amillennialist claim that the millennium does not refer to a Messianic reign on Earth but to Christ's reign from heaven at present. However, Satan is bound during the millennium to keep him from deceiving the nations and then thrown into hell where the Antichrist and the False Prophet had been thrown 100 years earlier. In addition, the first resurrection that occurs at Christ's return is followed by another resurrection when the 1000 years are ended. Isaiah's prophecy of the new heaven and Earth is clearly terrestrial. He mentions Jerusalem, Israel, building houses, planting vineyards, dying in old age, New Moon and Sabbath. The twenty pages of Ezekiel 40 – 48 describes a new temple and centre of worldwide worship during the millennium. Ezekiel hears a voice from the temple saying: This is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet where I'll live among the Israelites forever (Ezek 43:7). The sixteen pages of Revelation describe the last-day events, followed by Jesus' return and the millennium, during which the glory and honor of the nations are brought to Jerusalem. After describing the destruction of the last days, Peter says: In keeping with his promise we await a new heaven and a new Earth where righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13).

Revelation 21:1-22:5 is often regarded as a description of the new/renewed heavens and the Earth, but on closer scrutiny, we find that only the first verse relates to the new Earth. John saw a new heaven and Earth, the first heaven and Earth having passed away, and the sea was no more. That is all that he says about the Earth.

The rest of the passage is about New Jerusalem, which descends from heaven and is the abode of God and the redeemed. The holy city is a place, but it isn't in our place-time dimension. It is a symbolic representation of the community of the redeemed. Consequently, there is little said about contact with the surrounding nations and the world. Still, there is enough to indicate that New Jerusalem relates to the millennial era and corresponds in some way to the earthly Jerusalem. It is a picture of the saint's glorification, beginning from the time of the resurrection, and the marriage feast of the Lamb, which celebrates their union with him.

The new heavens and Earth that John saw in Rev 21:1 is a brief vision of the world during the millennium. It is the new heavens and Earth

that Isaiah saw (Isa 65:17-25, 66:22-24), the renewal of all things that Jesus spoke about, the liberation of the creation from its bondage to decay that Paul spoke about (Rom 8:21). The old order will pass away under Messiah's rule. The sea is often a metaphor for the tumult and rebellion of the nations, in which case 'no more sea' would reflect the peace and righteousness that the nations experience under the Messiah's firm rule. Psalm 72 is a messianic psalm that anticipates a worldwide rule. All the kings of the earth serve the Messiah as he rules *from sea to sea* (Zech 9:10).

The earth and heavens flee from God's presence at the white throne judgment (Rev 20:11), when they have finally served their purpose. The unrighteous dead are judged according to what they have done and then consigned to hell together with death and Hades. Only what is immortal remains.

Revelation 21:2 – 22:5 describes John's vision of New Jerusalem, whose inhabitants are the immortal bride of Christ. This is our eternal home. New Jerusalem descends from heaven; it is the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22), the abode of deceased saints before resurrection. Earth is not mentioned as the destination of this city or community, but it relates to the Earth in some way because the city descends from heaven, and God's dwelling place is now with man. Heaven has come down to Earth, reminiscent of when Adam and Eve heard the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8).

The purpose of this vision is to portray in symbolic form the glorification of the saints in their relationship to the Messiah and God during the messianic reign and on into eternity. It is the climax of the book, and is fittingly left to the end before concluding remarks are made by Jesus and John. The descent of the holy city (Rev 21:2, 9-10) seems to be another way of describing the resurrection of the righteous. Before the descent, the spirits of the righteous are in the holy city in heaven. After the descent, the resurrected saints are in the holy city near the Earth. After the saints are resurrected at the Messiah's return, there follows the wedding of the Lamb (19:6-7), after which believers are eternally united to God.

The OT prophecies give us more details about the earthly messianic reign when the Messiah rules from Mount Zion with the saints (Dan

7:27). There are houses and gardens (Isa 65:21-22), and the Messiah rules over the unbelieving survivors of the nations (Zech 14:16). He rules them with justice and righteousness resulting in worldwide peace (Isa 2:4). The Earth is gradually regenerated with an ideal climate free of drought or storm. The curse will be removed and nature will be in harmony with man, with no more thistles and thorns and no more danger from animals, reptiles, insects, bacteria, or viruses (Isa 11:6-9). Man will live progressively longer on earth as disease is eradicated (Isa 65:20).

When the righteous are resurrected and raptured at the Messiah's return, they'll reign over the earth with the Messiah (Dan 7:18, 22, Rev 20). Although John saw only those who had been beheaded because they bore testimony to Jesus, these martyrs represent all the righteous, who come back to life in what is termed, the first resurrection. That is the straightforward interpretation of Revelation 20. They'll feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the royal family. The nations, who are the kingdom's subjects, will bring tribute to Jerusalem, and serve God's people, but they can't enter New Jerusalem (Isa 60, Rev 21:26-27).

The resurrection body is spiritual, supernatural, imperishable, glorious, powerful, and bearing the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Cor 15:42-44). Not much more is said about those resurrection bodies, except what Paul said, but we shouldn't think of the resurrection body as being unsuitable for life on Earth. Jesus appeared to people over 40 days in his resurrection body, before ascending to the Father's throne. They touched him, and he breathed on them and talked and ate with them. Jesus was recognizable by those who knew him, but that was something that he could control (Mt 28:17, Lk 24:15, 31, Jn 20:15-16, 21:4, 7, 12). Gordon Fee in his commentary suggests that when the resurrected body is called 'spiritual' (1 Cor 15:44), it is not in the sense of 'immaterial', but of 'supernatural'.

The resurrected Jesus was supernatural in that he could walk through walls and disappear into another realm. We can expect that of our resurrection bodies because we'll be like him. We're only given a symbolic representation of our home, New Jerusalem; our mode of existence has not been revealed. The description of our future home, New Jerusalem, is symbolic because it represents existence in a

different realm. New Jerusalem is distinct from, but closely related to, the earthly Jerusalem. Paul spoke of the present city of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem that is above, who is our mother (Gal 4:25-26).

## **Messianic reign prophecies**

The OT Messianic reign prophecies are not situated on a newly created planet or in heaven but on this present Earth (Ps 2:6, 8, 110:2, Isa 35:1-10, 49:8-23, 51:4-6, Dan 7:14, Mic 4:1-8, Zech 8:2-8). See also the following NT references:

**Mt 19:28** Jesus told them: I'm telling you the truth. When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne in the new world, you, my followers, will sit on twelve thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel.

**Acts 3:21** He (the Messiah) must remain in heaven until that time when God will renew everything, as he promised long ago through his prophets.

**Rom 8:19-21** The creation eagerly awaits for God's children to be revealed. For the creation was allowed to lose its purpose, not by its own choice, but by the will of God who allowed it, in the expectation that it'll be delivered from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of God's children.

**2 Pet 3:12-13** As you await and hasten the arrival of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire. But in keeping with his promise, we're looking forward to new heavens and a new Earth where people will do what is right.

Peter is not asking the faithful to look forward and hasten the end of the world. He uses the Greek word *παρουσία*, which he used earlier (2 Pet 1:16, 3:4), where it refers to the coming of the Lord. The promise he refers to of a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells alludes to the prophecy in Isaiah 65:17ff, which is about a new order of things on earth under the Messiah. The former things will not be remembered or even come to mind. The glorious Jerusalem described in Isaiah 62 is also millennial. The prophets knew nothing of a new planet, only a renewed earth. Isaiah describes a glorious Jerusalem (Isa 62:4) with a new name 'Hephzibah' (My Delight is in Her). He tells

the faithful to give the Lord no rest, until he makes Jerusalem a song of praise throughout the earth (Isa 62:7). Her inhabitants are called are called ‘the Holy People’ and ‘the redeemed of the Lord’ (Isa 62:12).

## **Eternal life is kingdom life**

Life in the kingdom of God can be equated with eternal life, or simply life, as John refers to it. The eternal life for which we hope and expect will initially be worked out on this Earth in the Messiah’s kingdom.

Matthew records Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats where kingdom life is equated with eternal life. After the king tells those on his right to come and inherit the kingdom (Mt 25:34), he says, those people will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life (Mt 24:46).

John’s Gospel only mentions the kingdom of God twice, when Jesus talks with Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again. But John makes up for this by referring seventeen times to ‘eternal life’ and 19 times to ‘life’. What is eternal life if it is not life in the kingdom from God? Living as a king and co-heir with Jesus will be exciting and glorious, but this life is also defined as knowing the Father and the one he sent, Jesus the Messiah. Eternal life is knowing God, being united to God through Christ in a relationship akin to marriage, and reigning with him on into eternity. Believers have already crossed over from death to life (Jn 5:24).

The kingdom is also equated with life in Mark 9:43-47. Jesus said it is better to lose a hand or foot or eye than to be thrown into hell. Better to ‘enter life’ maimed, he said twice, but the third time he said, ‘better to enter the kingdom of God’, equating ‘life’ with ‘the kingdom of God’. The kingdom is also contrasted with hell, which is literally Gehenna, Jerusalem’s burning rubbish heap in the valley of Hinnon. It is interesting that these two eternal destinies, heaven and hell, are pictured as a New Jerusalem (Isa 65:18-19) and Gehenna (Isa 66:24, Mk 9:47) on the outskirts. John maintains the picture (Rev 22:15), saying that *outside* are dogs, sorcerers, immoral people, murderers, idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. The Jerusalem of Isaiah 60 is the glorified Israelite capital of a regenerated earth; that of Revelation 21 is heavenly in origin and is the dwelling of God and the Church.

After the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told his disciples that it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to get into the kingdom of God (Mk 10:25). By talking about life rather than the kingdom, John concentrates his teaching on the spiritual life we already have, rather than focusing on the future. John's Gospel was written later than the Synoptic Gospels, and he wrote predominantly to a Gentile audience. He mentions 'the Jews' 70 times, referring especially to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time. Kingdom terminology was not so relevant to the Gentiles as it had been for the Jews that Jesus ministered to. Even now, talking about 'eternal life' is more relevant to most people than talking about the kingdom of God.

John's final book, Revelation, is all about the final showdown, the events that will happen before and after Jesus' return, leading into the earthly kingdom. The central verse is Revelation 11:15, where the world's kingdom becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of his Messiah, who then reigns forever and ever.

The time for Jesus' return is drawing nearer, with Israel having already returned to their historical land and with globalization and the talk of world government on the increase. The scene is now set for the rise of the Antichrist, the day of judgment at Armageddon, the salvation of Israel, Jesus' return, and the millennium. As the end approaches, kingdom terminology will become more relevant and precious to God's people.

## **New Jerusalem**

This section could have been entitled 'the eternal state', but New Jerusalem is the biblical term that expresses this idea. When the Messiah's reign on Earth ends, he'll hand the kingship over to God the Father. In doing so, the Son becomes subject to the Father so that the Father may be all in all. Jesus will be the undisputed king over the Earth during the millennium, the King of kings and Lord of lords, but when this Earth disappears and all unbelievers are judged, only New Jerusalem remains, with the throne of God and the Lamb.

In John's vision of the Last Judgment, he makes a clear statement about the created universe. He said the Earth and the heavens fled from God's presence, and no place was found for them (Rev 20:11). After

the judgment, Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, and anyone whose name is not found in the book of life is consigned to that same fate. That is the end of the world and the whole created universe.

Scholars such as R. H. Charles, Theodore Zahn, and G. R. Beasley-Murray interpret the vision of New Jerusalem as millennial rather than the eternal state but the relationship described there between God and his people is eternal. The saints enter New Jerusalem and eternity at the resurrection and continue there forever (Rev 22:3-4). It is portrayed as both millennial and eternal.

Revelation 21:24 speaks of *the nations* walking by the light of the glory of God, which shines from New Jerusalem. Then John says that the gates are always open and the kings of the earth bring their splendor to it (Rev 21:25-26). This fulfills the Isaiah 60 prophecy, which describes the glorification of earthly Jerusalem and its temple as the nations bring their wealth to it. Then John reminds us that only those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life can enter New Jerusalem. Time and eternity, Earth and heaven, come together in these verses. The saints will reign over the Earth during the millennium from New Jerusalem. The throne of God and the Lamb are there, but at the same time, the Messiah will be seated on the Davidic throne in the earthly Jerusalem (Ezek 43:6-7).

God dwells in New Jerusalem, and Jesus is referred to seven times as the Lamb. The holy city is called 'the wife of the Lamb', and there is mention of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and the Lamb's book of life. Father and Son are linked together in three ways: The glory of God gives the city light and the Lamb is its lamp, while the throne of God and the Lamb is mentioned twice. There is no temple in New Jerusalem, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are there, but there is a temple in the earthly Jerusalem, where the unregenerate nations come to worship. The title 'Lamb' occurs in Revelation 28 times. Although the Greek word is diminutive in form, it no longer had this meaning in the first century. It may rather designate the leading ram, who leads his flock to victory. He is the shepherd (Rev 7:17), who shepherds the nations with an iron rod. The Lamb of Revelation is the glorified Christ, enthroned with God, and victorious over all opposing forces, whether human or demonic. In Revelation 5, he is the

Lamb who was slain, and several verses speak of the blood of the Lamb who purchased men for God from every tribe and nation.

## **New Jerusalem and earthly Jerusalem**

1. At the Messiah's return, the Mount of Olives splits in two and Jerusalem is raised higher than the surrounding mountains (Mic 4:1-2). Instruction proceeds from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem. The fountain that flows from the temple (Joel 3:18, Ezek 47:1-12, Zech 14:8) and the throne (Rev 22:1-2) brings physical blessings to the world (cf. Rev 7:17, 21:6b, 22:17).
2. New Jerusalem symbolizes the union of the Messiah and his bride, the Church, the union of God and his people. Once resurrected, the Church lives in that eternal community, both during and after the millennium.
3. New Jerusalem's great wall symbolizes security; the 12 foundations - the apostles' teaching, the 12 gates - Israel's experiences, the streets of gold - wealth and glory, the large cubic dimensions - spaciousness, the river of life - eternal life, the tree of life - health and freedom from curse and death. There is no temple because God is there in person, and there is no sun or moon because God and the Lamb give it light..
4. Promises made to the conquerors in the seven letters include having the name of New Jerusalem written on them, sitting with the Messiah on his earthly throne, and having authority over the nations.
5. New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God. It is not a part of this creation, but its glory is visible as a bright light overlapping earthly Jerusalem. The holy city consists of its inhabitants: God, angels, and the redeemed. For John to see it in his vision, he was carried away in the Spirit to a very high mountain (Rev 21:10-11). The city's infrastructure is described symbolically as gold and precious jewels as we cannot understand heavenly things.
6. The nations that survive the Great Tribulation travel to Jerusalem to worship the Lord year after year.
7. Alluding to Isaiah 60:11, which describes the earthly Jerusalem, the gates are never shut, day or night, and the kings

of the earth bring their splendor to it. They cannot enter New Jerusalem because it's only for the redeemed and it's in the heavenly realm.

8. The redeemed have access to the tree of life (Rev 22:14) and are immortal. The leaves are for the healing of the nations on Earth, who are ministered to by the redeemed, described as a kingdom of priests. Evildoers are spoken of as being outside New Jerusalem (Rev 22:15), alluding to Gehenna, a symbol of hell.
9. The last eight chapters of Ezekiel are a vision of earthly Jerusalem during the millennium. A new temple is there and a division of land for the prince, the priesthood, the Levites, and all the tribes of Israel. Israel are God's people on Earth, who supervise the temple worship.
10. Jesus the Messiah is Israel's king and rules over the entire world.

## **The essence of eternal life in paradise**

**God is making everything new** - no eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, the things that God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).

**Relationships** - The triune God dwells eternally with his redeemed people. They are his people, sometimes called children, and he is their God. They live in the heavenly realm and see his face. There is no temple there because God is present in person. They serve him and reign with him.

**Light and life** - The river of the water of life is assuages every thirst, the tree of life communicates life and bears an abundance of fruit to give complete satisfaction. Leaves are symbolic of health and well-being. There is no night there, and no sun and moon are needed because God is light.

**Bliss** - There is no curse there or any effect of a curse. There is no death, the saints are immortal. There is no suffering, tears, or pain. There are no unbelievers or evildoers, or anything impure, only those enrolled in the Lamb's book of life.

**Glory** - The city shines with God's glory. The precious stones, gates of pearl, and streets of gold are all symbolic of the glory that awaits God's people. It is the glory of wealth, royalty, health, wholeness, purity, sufficiency, and happiness.

**Kingship** - He who overcomes inherits all this. The saints reign forever (Rev 22:5), an allusion to Daniel 7:18, where the saints inherit the sovereignty, power, and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven. Their kingship is everlasting, and all rulers will serve and obey them.

## **The creation and the new creation**

What does the future hold? Scientists are rather pessimistic about the future of the universe and wonder what man can do to ensure our eventual survival. I doubt that they can do anything apart from taking care of the environment. The future has always been, and will always be, in God's hands. The choice for man is between heaven and hell. For those who choose to follow the Savior, a glorious future has been promised. We live in a space-time dimension and this physical universe is all we know. But we read in the Bible about God, the Creator, who lives in another dimension called heaven. We can't see him, because we don't live in that dimension. But what of the future? We have the promise of a renewed sky and Earth, and New Jerusalem. How do these places relate to our present Earth? What will living be like in those new domains? What can we say about the continuity or discontinuity of the human person and the creation with its geology, flora, and fauna?

The Messianic kingdom will be a continuation of this present Earth. The present world and its infrastructure will be totally devastated by warfare and earthquakes during the Great Tribulation, but mankind and the creation will survive. The Messiah's government will be a theocracy, not the rule of God alone, but the rule of the Messiah and his monarchy. He'll restore the world and stamp out all forms of evil. The present creation is in bondage to decay and degradation; everything dies and degenerates, the universe's energy is gradually moving towards disorder. Romans 8:21 says that the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom of the glory of God's children. The curse will be lifted as the Messiah

brings the Earth back to an ideal condition. But what will this liberation lead to? The creation won't become immortal but it'll experience freedom from the bondage to decay. Godet, in his commentary on Romans (p. 315), says that this liberty expresses the unchecked development of the free expansion of all the powers of life, beauty, and perfection, wherewith this new nature will be endowed. There is no resurrection or immortality here; the individual in the animal or plant world is merely the temporary manifestation of the species.

The rebirth or regeneration of nature during the millennium should not be confused with the glorification of redeemed humanity. Their glorification begins with resurrection, which is a transformation of the body resulting in immortality. It is the beginning of the process whereby redeemed humans attain supernatural bodies, become heirs of Messiah's kingdom, are formally united to Christ, and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). They'll reign with God forever. Animals and the rest of the creation aren't included. The creation is doomed to annihilation as the scientists predict, but it'll happen in God's perfect timing. Before it's annihilated, it'll be perfectly restored during the 1000-year era.

There are only two ultimate destinations for humanity: what is usually described as heaven and hell. There is also an intermediate state after death. For the believer it is called 'being present with the Lord', for the unbeliever, it is Hades, the underworld. At the resurrection, believers will rise to life in New Jerusalem, and from there they'll rule the Earth. After the millennium, believers will continue to reign with God, while unbelievers will be resurrected and condemned.

There are many questions about the millennium. Who will live on Earth during the millennium? Are people born and do people die during the millennium? Is there an opportunity for salvation during the millennium? Are the glorified saints in their resurrected bodies mixed with mortals on Earth during the millennium?

My position on these things has been clearly stated. The resurrected saints in their immortal bodies will live in New Jerusalem, not on Earth, nevertheless, they'll rule the Earth. As the royal family, they're the ruling monarchy. They'll no longer have children and they'll never die. The subjects of the kingdom are the survivors of the Great

Tribulation, both Israel, who have been saved, and the nations, who are unbelievers. Jerusalem will be the world capital and the Messiah will be king over all the Earth. During the millennium, there'll be one Lord, and his name, the only name worthy of worship. There is no biblical evidence that the Messiah will be visible, apart from his glory, which will fill the temple in Jerusalem. This temple will be the center of worship for the nations, who will come there and bring gifts and pay homage to the king.

The saints will have bodies like Jesus' resurrected body and they'll appear on Earth in their roles as priests and rulers (Mt 5:5, 1 Cor 6:2, Rev 5:10). In a relevant parable, Jesus gives a servant charge of 10 cities (Lk 19:17) and later in Revelation gives the overcomers authority over the nations (Rev 2:26). The unbelievers will enjoy the ideal conditions on Earth during those days, and presumably there will be the opportunity to be saved, but the rebellion at the end of the 1000 years, when Satan is released from his prison, indicates that the final generation will be unregenerate. The deceased will be buried and raised at the Last Judgment. Believers will then join the elect in New Jerusalem, while unbelievers are consigned to hell.

The Jewish generation that survives the Great Tribulation will be converted after Jesus' return, but they'll not be raptured at this time. The Messiah will pour out his Spirit on them and they'll be cleansed from sin and impurity (Zech 12:10, 13:1). They'll enter the millennium as God's redeemed nation, Israel. In their previous unbelief, they forfeited the kingdom, but they'll serve God as priests and Levites at the temple so that the nations can come and worship God acceptably.

In New Jerusalem, there is no death; all the inhabitants are immortal. This holy city is the home of God, the Messiah, angels, and the redeemed. The latter will enter this state when they are resurrected at the Messiah's arrival, and they'll live and reign with him forever. They'll reign over the earth during the millennium from New Jerusalem. The city will be in a different space-time dimension, and the saints will commute between the city and the Earth, just as Jesus did for 40 days after his resurrection, and just as angels have always done. New Jerusalem will correspond to the earthly Jerusalem and hover over it, or overlap it, so that the two, in a sense, become one. It is the holy city, because God is there. The ultimate Jewish king, the

Messiah, is also there on the throne. Its gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel, and its foundations are named after the apostles. The redeemed have their names written in the Lamb's book of life and constitute the royal family. During the millennium, the nations will see the light of Zion's glory (Isa 60:3, Rev 21:24) and they'll bring their wealth to it, destined for the temple in the earthly Jerusalem, because nothing impure can enter the celestial city (Rev 21:27). This city is a place where there is no more death, crying, or pain. God said he'll make everything new (Rev 21:5). What is said in Revelation 21:2 – 22:5 does not describe the world during Messiah's reign, it describes the heavenly New Jerusalem. Apart from its connection with Jerusalem as the city of God, the holy city shows no continuity with planet Earth. The earth is temporary, the holy city is eternal. Jesus said the sky and Earth will pass away, and Hebrews 12:26-28 teaches the removal of created things, things that can be shaken, so that only what cannot be shaken may remain.