



"All Things New: Our Eternal Home"

Revelation 21

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His Italian mother named him after the gospel writer, Mark in the hopes that he too would tell the gospel truth. It is ironic that, later when he wrote a bestselling book on his world travels, cynics nicknamed it *Il Milione*: "The Book of a Million Lies." And Mark, whose mother hoped would grow up to tell the truth, was called *Marco Milione*: Marco, the man of a million lies.

13th Century Europeans found it impossible to believe Mark's tales of faraway lands. He claimed that, when he was only seventeen, he took an epic journey lasting a quarter of a century, taking him across the steppes of Russia, the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, the wastelands of Persia, and over the top of the world through the Himalayas. In Mongolia he witnessed the horrifying funeral of Mangu Khan where 20,000 prisoners of war were buried alive to accompany the powerful prince into the afterworld.

He was the first European to enter China. Through an amazing set of circumstances, he became a favorite of the most powerful ruler on planet earth, the Kublai Khan whose vast domain eclipsed that of the ancient Roman Empire. Mark saw cities that made European capitals look like roadside villages. The Khan's palace dwarfed the largest castles and cathedrals in Europe. Made of gold-coated cane, each piece was held together by ropes of silk, so that the whole palace could be disassembled and moved at the whim of the Khan. Yet it was so massive that its banquet room alone could seat 6,000 diners at one time, each eating on a plate of pure gold.

Mark saw the world's first paper money and marveled at the explosive power of gunpowder. It would be the 18th Century before Europe would manufacture as much steel as China was producing in the year 1267. He saw a postal service whose speed would not be equaled until the Pony Express some 600 years later. He became the first Italian to taste that Chinese culinary invention, pasta. As an officer of the Khan's court, he travelled to places no European would see for another 500 years.

After serving Kublai Khan for 17 years, Mark began his journey home to Venice, loaded down with gold, silk, and spices. And, tucked away in his pocket was a recipe for making pasta! The Khan had sent him on his way with a guard of 1,000 men. By the time they reached the Indian Ocean, 600 had drowned or died of disease. After a harrowing two-year journey, a ragged Mark barely limped home, most of his riches lost along the way. People dismissed his stories of a mythical place called China. His family priest rebuked him for spinning lies. When further troubles landed Mark in prison, he dictated his fantastic yarns to another prisoner who had been a writer of romantic stories. His book was entitled *The Travels of Marco Polo*. But a skeptical public dismissed it as *Il Milione*: The Book of a Million Lies. He would never shake his new nickname: Marco, the man of a million lies .

At his deathbed, his family, friends, and parish priest begged him to recant his tales of China lest he rot in hell for his lies. Setting his jaw and gasping for breath, Mark spit out his final words, "I have not even told you half of what I saw."

Though 13th Century Europeans rejected his stories as the tall tales of an unrepentant liar or lunatic, history has proven the truthfulness of *The Travels of Marco Polo*. A century later, another Italian sat down to read Mark's book. By the time young Christopher Columbus finished it, a dream was sparked that he too could find new worlds waiting to be explored..

1300 years before Marco Polo, another man went on an amazing journey to heaven itself. Even we jaded postmoderns shake our heads in disbelief at *The Travels of St. John* recorded in the Book of Revelation. We might be tempted to join other skeptics and call *The Travels of St. John* the Book of a Million Lies. But St. John would say about his journey to heaven, "I have not even told you half of what I saw." If we will devour *The Travels of St. John*, with the same intensity that Christopher Columbus plumbed *The Travels of Marco Polo*, it might even inspire us to journey across uncharted oceans to spiritual worlds we have never before explored. Revelation 21 makes an amazing claim that forces us to answer the most important question in life:

The Claim: A better heaven and earth are yet to come.

The Question: Are your bags packed and ready to go?

Most folks aren't cutting in front of the line to get into heaven. First of all, if we have to spend eternity with religious folk, heaven isn't very appealing. Billy Joel sings, "Some say heaven is better, but I say it ain't. I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." Mark Twain wrote, "You go to heaven for the climate, but you go to hell for the company." And heaven might be as boring as the folks who will be there. Comedian Rick Reynolds joked on HBO, "As far as I can tell from studying Scripture, all you do in heaven is pretty much sit around all day and praise the Lord. I don't know about you, but I think that after the first fifty million years of that, I'd start to get a little bored." Writer Isaac Asimov is more caustic: "Whatever the torture of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse."

Is heaven going to be boring? Pollster George Barna says that the vast majority of churchgoers think so. Most of them only remember the first part of St. John's Revelation where white-robed saints conduct a neverending worship service around God's throne. For any of us who grew up in stoutly-religious homes where we were dragged to services every time the church doors opened, an eternity of hymn singing is not appetizing. But most folks have never read Revelation to the end or their eyes would be opened to what St. John describes in Revelation 21:1 as "...a new heaven and a new earth..." This is what they might discover in this new heaven and earth:

1. Our objections to heaven are answered by heaven itself

Notice again how Revelation 21 begins: "Then I saw a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, for the *first* heaven and the *first* earth had passed away..." We see immediately that the faraway place where saints stand before the throne and sing 'round the clock is only temporary. When history ends, we are *not* going to be up there, but down here in a brand new earth

under a brand new heaven. Like Adam and Eve we will be in a pristine *Garden of Eden* minus the snake. We will keep for eternity the paradise that our first parents lost in less than a day. When we understand this, the three most common objections to heaven begin to fade away.

1) If I've been made for heaven, why do I want to stay here?

Why do we want to go to heaven, yet stubbornly cling to this present life? Why do we say that heaven is preferable to this earth, and yet risk losing heaven to gain the things of this earth? Why do we rejoice and grieve (at the same time) when loved ones go to heaven? Why are we such a bundle of contradictions? The answer is tucked away in the creation story. Genesis 2:7 says, "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Our very nature pulls us in opposite directions. On the one hand, we are the dust of earth. On the other, we are the breath of God. Part of us belongs to this earth, and the other belongs to heaven. That which is dust draws us irresistibly to the earth from which we sprung. It longs for the things of this earth, and fights tooth-and-nail to stay here to the bitter end. It will even trade away heaven for stuff that ultimately turns to dust. This is the part of our psyche that can't imagine how heaven can be better than earth, and drives us mad with grief when a loved one is snatched away to heaven.

On the other hand, the "breath of God" drives us to seek something transcendent beyond this earth. It reduces us to utter emptiness even when we possess all the things of this earth. This "breath of God" draws us toward the heavenly One who created us even as we cling for dear life to the earth from which we came. Pulled both upward and downward, we become the most schizophrenic of God's creatures.

But "...a new heaven and a new earth..." resolves the contradictions that rips apart our psyche. We won't be in a heaven apart from earth. Nor will we be on an earth separated from heaven. Heaven and earth are brought together in one place. There was a time in our distant past when that was true. Genesis 3:9 says that God walked with Adam in the Garden. In that first paradise heaven and earth were united. There was no tension between dust and spirit.

But, after sin corrupted paradise, an infinite gulf separated heaven from earth, making it impossible to seize both at the same time. We grab one, we must let go of the other. Jesus asked in Mark 8:36, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?" C.S. Lewis wrote, "Aim for heaven, and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither." Revelation 21:3 says of the new heaven and earth, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them..." We will never again have to choose between God who created us and the earth from which we sprang. Once again we will walk with God in paradise, our tortured psyches finally at peace.

2) Why does God have to make a *new* heaven and earth?

Verse five says, "He who was seated on the throne says, 'I am making everything new.'" Those of us who love this present earth are tempted to ask, "Why doesn't God just renovate what we have now? Why send in the wrecking crew and start over from scratch?" We attempt to fix what is broken in this world. Utopians (religious and secular alike) try in vain to remake earth into heaven only to create yet another "hell on earth." In the same way, religions, philosophies, and self-help gurus offer extreme makeovers to desperately-unfulfilled people. But the gospel never promises to renovate you. Instead it calls the "old man" to die. It says that after we die to self, we will be resurrected as new spiritual creatures in Christ. Old things must pass away, and everything has to become new again. Our present bodies are also destined to be resurrected new again. And, this earth is too far gone to be fixed. Religious movements, social engineers, and empire builders constantly try to revive a dying planet, fix failing economies, cure diseases, control climates, and stem overpopulation. But their new world orders can't create what is in the "new earth" of verse four: "no more tears...no more death or mourning or crying or pain." Verse four reminds us that those things are unfixable until "the old order of things has passed away." As long as tears fall, we need a *new* earth. Whenever a single heart aches, or a car bomb blows up a marketplace, or a starving child holds up an empty cup to be filled, or a teen runs away from abuse, or a wandering immigrant fails to find a home, we know again why only God has do what history proves us incapable of doing: making *everything* new again.

3) What if heaven doesn't have some of my favorite things?

Again verse four says, "...for the old order of things has passed away." I'm excited about this *new* earth, but there are a lot of things I love in this *old* earth. I love being married to Joyce, but Jesus says there will be no marriage in heaven. I enjoy the beach, but verse one says there won't be any sea. I adore the stars at night, but verse 25 says that there will be no night. When I tell young people that there won't be any sex on the new earth, they're not sure they want to end up there. When I tell old folks that we will eat great meals there, they respond, "Hey, one out of two isn't so bad!"

During a time when these things really bothered me, C.S. Lewis was very helpful. He talked about the time he had to give his eleven year-old stepson the "birds and the bees" talk. After he finished, the boy looked up at him in disgust and said, "Okay, I guess I'll do *it* when I get married, but only if I can eat a chocolate bar while I do *it*." To this child, eating a candy bar was life's supreme joy. In his limited sphere of knowledge, he couldn't imagine that the pleasures of the marriage bed could rival chocolate. C.S. Lewis said that we are all just as naïve when it comes to heaven. We might say, "Okay, I guess I'll go to heaven, but only if I can keep doing whatever gives me the most gratification in this life." Like Lewis' stepson, we don't realize that God has in store for us future pleasures that will eclipse our greatest present joys. Revelation 21 is not an exhaustive catalogue of what awaits us, but

only a quick peek through a partially-opened door. I can hardly wait to see the *new* pleasures that hide behind that door. My anticipation is fueled by the words of 2 Corinthians 2:9, "No ear has seen, nor ear has heard, and no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

2. Everything *will* be made new again!

The first three verses of Revelation 21 are reminiscent of the opening verses of Genesis. Originally he created the old heavens and earth out of nothing. He will create the *new* heavens and earth the same way. Another apostle describes what happens to the *old* universe in 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the LORD will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire; and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." Though that ancient Galilean fisherman couldn't have known what modern scientists have since discovered, what he says is so impeccably accurate that it could have only been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

He speaks of the whole universe disappearing with a roar. I'm not sure if this present universe began with a Big Bang, but it will end that way! Peter says, "...the elements will be destroyed..." Though Peter didn't know what an atom or molecule was, that is exactly what he is talking about when he speaks of the *elements*. The word he uses for destroy literally means "to let loose" or "to come apart." What happens when atoms separate? Molecules come apart and everything they form blows apart with an explosive roar. Science doesn't know what holds the atoms together. But St. Paul says of Jesus in Colossians 1:17, "...in him all things hold together." Like a thief who catches us by surprise, our Preeminent Christ will one day relax his grip on this universe, the atoms will separate in a chain reaction, and everything will explode a holocaust. In the deafening silence that follows all that will be left is the same blackness of nothingness that existed before the first creation. Out of that formless void, God will create a new and indestructible cosmos.

3. Wait until you see your new house!

Notice the first thing St. John sees in this *new* cosmos. Verse two says, "I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." John uses two words to describe the New Jerusalem: a city and a bride. When you read the fantastic descriptions of this architectural marvel floating down to earth you are reminded that it is both "a city" and "a bride dressed for her husband." This is a city where the bride of Christ will live. Jesus promised his disciples in John 14:3, "I am going away to prepare a place for you." And what a place it is! Take some time and savor the description of this New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. It boggles the imagination: twelve foundations made of precious stone, gigantic gates made of a single pearl (where did those oysters come from?), and streets made of pure gold.

We won't be living in separate mansions. Remember, Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms..." The Carpenter from Galilee really outdid

himself on this house. Verses 15-17 say that it is 1500 miles long and 1500 miles wide—as long as from Florida to Maine; as wide as from New York City to the Mississippi River. But this city is a cube, as high as it is wide and long. The Empire state building has about 100 stories. This city would have 528,000 stories, each 1500 miles square for a grand total of one trillion, 188 billion square miles! If half the people who ever lived in the history of the world were to end up in heaven (a generous number indeed), there would be 400 square miles of space for each family in our Father's house. This makes Hollywood mansions look like backyard dog houses!

4. No one has the time to float on clouds or strum on harps.

If 71% of our present earth is covered by ocean, imagine how much land will be on a *new* earth without seas. It will all be as lush as the Garden of Eden. I don't know what we will do in this paradise, but verse 24 says of the New Jerusalem, "The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it." The new earth is going to be filled with diversity. Every race, tribe, language, and nation will be represented. Isaiah 11:6 says, "the lion will lie down with the lamb." There will be animals on this new earth. I'd like to believe that my childhood Collie dog, Storm might be resurrected to be there with me. There will be kings and cities. In Luke 19:17 Jesus promises us that those who are faithful will rule over cities in the world to come." Is it possible that we will also have children in this new earth? Why would Adam and Eve be told to populate the old earth, without the same thing happening in the new cosmos?

Verse 24 says that people will bring their "splendor" into the new Jerusalem. The Greek word for "splendor" speaks of the works of our hands. It was used in ancient times to speak of produce. We will work the ground, just as Adam and Eve were called to do in the first paradise, only without thistles and thorns. Imagine the tomatoes we will grow in the light of Jesus! *Splendor* speaks of other things: works of art, inventions of human ingenuity, musical masterpieces, songs that make the spirit soar, and a billion other creations we can hardly imagine. Imagine the exciting new games and sports we will develop to challenge the superhuman strength and intelligence of our new resurrected bodies!

Verse 26 says of the new city, "The glory and the honor of the nations will be brought into it." Everything we create on this new earth will be glorious and honorable. Nothing will break down or wear out. Nor will it maim, demean, destroy, or kill anyone else. We will never be disappointed or frustrated in our work. We won't need night because life will be too exciting and fulfilling to ever want to go to bed. We will never grow bored because there will be more to explore, more to create, and more to enjoy. Now, no one fully appreciates our efforts. But then, we will rush into the New Jerusalem to show our heavenly Father the works of our hands and receive that applause of heaven on earth.

5. What's *not* in heaven is as important as what is in heaven.

Verse one says there will be **no seas**. In other words, there will be no storms or riptides or tsunamis, or turbulence. It will be a place of absolute peace, without wars or interpersonal conflicts. Verses 3&4 promises us there will be **no unhappiness**. You will never shed a tear, feel a tinge of pain, or mourn a loss. There will be no pharmacies or psychiatrists in heaven. Verse 22 says there will be **no temple**. We won't need organized religion to tell us what to do because we will live in perfect and natural relationship with our God. Verses 23-25 say that there will be **no sun, moon or night**. Things go bump in the night. Evil men love the night. Weary people are desperate for night. Anxious people dread the night. Crime stalks the night. But all of that will disappear along with night in the *new* earth. Verse 25 says that there will be **no locked doors**. The gates of the New Jerusalem will never be shut. Why should they? God is in this city, and everyone in this new world is honest. No one will ever have to worry about being swindled, robbed, violated, or assaulted. Verse 27 finally tells us that there will be **no impurity**. In verses 7&8 we are told that "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderer, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars" will have already been cast into hell. Only the redeemed and transformed will be in this new cosmos. Your neighbors will be as perfect as you are in the *new* dream world that is yet to come.

6. Are your bags packed and ready to go?

I hope I've whetted your appetite for this new heaven and earth. St. John hasn't told us the half of what he saw in his vision of the future. Though I ponder much, I know little about what is to come. And words fail me when I try to convey the glories I anticipate in this cosmos to come. But I know that our eternity hangs on four facts: 1) **Heaven and hell are both real**. Human words (even those of Scripture) are inadequate to capture the wondrous pleasures of heaven and the eternal sufferings of hell. 2) **Eternity never ends. Therefore, at all costs I want to gain heaven and miss hell**. 3) **I want to put my whole trust in Christ alone for my eternal destiny**. Jesus is uncompromising: "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:8). He alone paid my way out of hell and my way into heaven by his death, burial and resurrection. The road to heaven is grace alone received by faith alone. 4) **Though the new heaven and earth is purchased by grace alone, how I live my life will make a difference in the one to come**. Jesus is clear: all of us will be held accountable. What I do on this old earth will be rewarded in the new earth to come. Nothing I do for God's glory is unimportant or insignificant. So I will live this present life to the fullest for my Lord, with my bags packed and ready to go to an infinitely better world.