

What Is Meant by “New Heavens and a New Earth”?

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Introduction

A couple years ago I was taking a ladies afternoon Bible class through the book of Revelation. As we discussed Revelation 21:1 that speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, one of the class participants raised her hand. Her question went something like this: “I thought that when we die Jesus takes our souls to heaven. Now I read there’s going to be new heavens and a new earth. So, according to this, I’m going to be living on a new earth. What ever happened to going to heaven? I’m confused.”

After her line of questioning I was also confused. The questions she asked, however, were legitimate. I tried to respond as best as I could. She made me think about life after death and our heavenly home with Christ in ways I had never really considered before. That’s why I’m also thankful to have been given the opportunity to share with you what I have found in Holy Scripture regarding the new heavens and the new earth.

“In the beginning...”

Genesis 1:1 begins the Holy Spirit’s account of the creation of the universe. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* As the record of creation progresses, we’re told concerning

- The light- *“God saw that the light was good,”* 1:4
- Vegetation- *“God saw that it was good,”* 1:12
- The sun, moon and stars- *“God saw that it was good,”* 1:18
- Sea creatures, fish and birds- *“God saw that it was good,”* 1:21
- Land creatures- *“God saw that it was good,”* 1:25

We then have the summary statement at the end of Genesis 1 that describes the perfection of the universe: *“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good,”* 1:31.

Genesis 2 records for us the creation of our first parents, Adam and Eve, who were made in God’s perfect image (1:26, 27). But then in Genesis 3 we witness how Satan tempted Eve in the form of a serpent, and Eve, Adam. Sin infects God’s perfect creation, and death enters the picture. Adam and Eve play the first “blame game.” God curses Satan (3:14), and he informs Adam and Eve of the disastrous results of their sin (3:16-19). Our first parents are banished from the Garden (3:23). One horrible result of Adam and Eve’s transgression is seen in Cain’s murder of his brother, Abel (4:1-8). Adam and Eve have another son, Seth, made in Adam’s sinful image (5:3). By the time of Noah, *“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time,”* 6:5.

But in the Garden, God promised that Offspring of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head (3:15). Eve thought her firstborn son was the Lord who had come to rescue them (cf. Luther’s translation of Gen. 4:1). Even Lamech, Noah’s father, thought his son was the promised Savior: *“He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed,”* Gen. 5:29. Looking ahead in faith to the Redeemer, the patriarchs and Old Testament believers longed *“for a better country—a heavenly one,”* Heb. 11:16. And so, when the patriarchs died, such as Abraham and Jacob, the Spirit tells us they were gathered to their people (Gen. 25:8; 49:29)—possible references to being received into heaven with their fellow believers in the promised Christ. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1). David wrote of eternal life with God, *“You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand,”* Psalm 16:11.

Isaiah

Then we come to the prophets—specifically, the prophet Isaiah. We have the first reference to new heavens and a new earth in Isaiah 65:17. In August Pieper’s extensive outline, this verse is found in part 3 of Isaiah II, consisting of chapters 58 through 66, that speak of the spiritual, eternal deliverance of God’s people. Chapter 65 specifically refers to “the final rejection of apostate Israel and the preservation of the faithful remnant for a blessed new order of things.”¹

Let’s take a closer look at 65:17—

כִּי־הִנְנִי בּוֹרֵא שָׁמַיִם הַחֲדָשִׁים וְאָרֶץ הַחֲדָשָׁה וְלֹא תִזְכְּרֶנָּה הַרְאֵשְׁנוֹת וְלֹא תִעֲלֶינָה עַל־לֵב:

Literal translation: **For behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth and the former things will not be remembered and will not spread over the heart.**

NIV: **Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.**

Through his prophet, Isaiah, God speaks of the approaching judgment on those who deliberately break his law and forsake him in unbelief for false idols. But he will create new heavens and a new earth for his Jerusalem, his people who are his servants. The old heaven and old earth will no longer be remembered. Keil says that *וְלֹא תִעֲלֶינָה עַל־לֵב* “signifies to come into the mind, not ‘take to heart,’ and is applied to a thing, the thought of which ‘ascends’ within us, and with which we are inwardly occupied.”² After this verse we see how this new creation will be a place of gladness and rejoicing: v. 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.*”

The following quote from August Pieper in regard to Isaiah 65:17 is significant:

The new heaven and earth, as in Genesis 1:1, are a unit... The whole is a graphic designation of the new order of things which the Lord will institute. However, as is generally true of the prophecy of the future kingdom of God, time and eternity, New Testament glory and heavenly glory are not sharply distinguished... The one great thought that everywhere shines through brightly is the banishment of all evil and sorrow, after the godless have been destroyed...³

Isaiah reiterates the thought of new heavens and a new earth in 66:22. In Pieper’s outline, chapter 66 concerns itself with “the end of the old congregation and the beginning of the new church.”⁴

כִּי כַאֲשֶׁר הַשָּׁמַיִם הַחֲדָשִׁים וְהָאָרֶץ הַחֲדָשָׁה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה עִמָּדִים לְפָנַי נְאֻם־יְהוָה כֵּן יַעֲמֵד זְרַעְכֶם וְשִׁמְכֶם:

Literal translation: **“For as the new heavens and the new earth which I make stand before me,” says Jehovah, “so will stand your seed and your name.”**

¹ August Pieper, transl. by E.E. Kowalke, *Isaiah II*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979, page 660

² F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. VII, Isaiah, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976 reprint, page 488.

³ A. Pieper, page 675.

⁴ A. Pieper, page 67.

NIV: “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure.”

In these closing verses of Isaiah, God speaks of eternal life in heaven and eternal death in hell. Eternal life is spoken of in these words. The name of God’s believing people as well as their descendants would stand before God as the new heavens and the new earth will stand before him.

Concerning the mention of “*your seed and your name*,” John Oswalt writes:

The tragedies of the old world, which called into question the very faithfulness of God, are gone. God had promised to Abraham a *name* and *seed*, children, but the sin of Israel and the rapacity of the world rulers made it seem as if even God could not keep his promises. Nonetheless, God is greater than human sin and human pride and is able to keep his promises. The old heavens and earth have been called to witness the justice of God in punishing his people (1:2); they had also been called to burst into song over the redemption of those people made possible by the work of the Servant (44:23; 49:13). Now the eternity of the new heavens and earth stands in testimony to the eternity of God’s promises.⁵

2 Peter 3:13

The phrase “*new heaven and a new earth*” is next found in the apostle Peter’s second epistle. Since it’s important to keep in mind the context of these words found in chapter 3, let’s review the entire section (2 Peter 3:10-14):

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. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

Now let’s narrow our focus to verse 13:

καινοὺς δὲ οὐρανούς καὶ γῆν καινὴν κατὰ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα αὐτοῦ προσδοκῶμεν, ἐν οἷς δικαιοσύνη κατοικεῖ.

Literal translation: **And a new heaven and new earth according to his promise we look for, in which righteousness dwells.**

Peter’s writing how we should conduct ourselves as we wait for God’s day when heaven and earth will be destroyed. In spite of this, we look for a new heaven and new earth which he promised in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. In this new heaven and new earth there is no sin.

Simon Kistemaker states that since the nouns *heaven* and *earth* lack definite articles, these two words form a pair.⁶ Lenski reinforces this thought by pointing out the two *new* are placed chiasmatically and as a result bring *heaven* and *earth* together.⁷ Kistemaker quotes R. C. Trench (Synonyms of the New Testament) to explain why the word καινοὺς is used:

⁵ John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, page 691.

⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987, page 340.

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude, Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945, page 349.

The adjective is used in comparing the new with the old, as in the saying, “The new is better than the old.” By contrast, the adjective *καίνο*s (new, novel) refers to that “which has recently come into existence.”⁸

In addition he quotes Henry Alford when he says:

With the word new, Peter teaches that this new creation comes forth out of the old creation. That is, the old has given birth to the new. “The flood did not annihilate the earth, but changed it; and as the new earth was the consequence of the flood, so the final new heaven and earth shall be of the fire.”⁹

Kistemaker also says that Peter purposely chose the word *κατοικεῖ* to express permanence: “The compound consists of the preposition *κατά* (down) and the basic verb *οικεω* (I dwell).”¹⁰

Because of the variant in 2 Peter 3:10 (NIV- “everything in it will be laid bare” vs. “be burned up”), there is the long-standing question: of what will the new heavens and new earth be made? Edward Koehler summarizes the debate clearly:

Some hold that, as in the beginning the world was created out of nothing, it will on the Last Day be reduced to nothing; they hold that the entire fabric and substance of heaven and earth and of all created things, intelligent creatures alone excepted, will be annihilated, and that a new heaven and new earth will be created.¹¹

Others hold that the “fashion” of this present world will certainly be destroyed by fire, but its fundamental substance will not be destroyed; they hold that from the atoms composing this substance a new heaven and a new earth will be fashioned, even as from the dust of our bodies a new resurrection-body will arise. They do not believe in the annihilation of substance, but in the renovation of substance. According to their belief the basic substance, from which heaven and earth were made, remains, but the fashion, the shape, size, condition, etc., will be changed.¹²

Franz Pieper points out that this was also debated in Lutheran circles all the way back to the time of the Reformation:

Our old Lutheran theologians are not agreed on whether this passing away is to be defined more specifically as a total annihilation...or only as a transformation or conversion... Luther, Brenz, Althammer, Ph. Nicolai, and others teach a transformation, principally on the basis of Romans 8:21: “The creation itself also shall be freed from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” Most of the earlier Lutheran theologians join Gerhard, Quenstedt, and Calov in assuming that the world will perish *quoad substantiam*. Gerhard (*Loci*, “*De consummatione seculi*,” para. 37-63) treats the subject extensively. He quotes the arguments pro and con and then gives his reasons why he regards a destruction according to the substance corresponding more fully to the statements of Scripture.¹³

It’s obvious that our fathers did not consider differences of opinion in this matter a doctrinal difference, but it was viewed more as an exegetical question:

That the world will be destroyed by fire is clearly taught in the Bible; but we may not charge a person with heresy who holds that this destruction will be either an annihilation or a renovation.¹⁴

Pieper shares this interesting quote from John Gerhard:

⁸ Kistemaker, page 341.

⁹ Kistemaker, p. 340

¹⁰ Kistemker, page 341.

¹¹ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971 reprint, p. 309

¹² Koehler, p. 310

¹³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, page 542f

¹⁴ Koehler, page 311

“We do not defend our opinion of the destruction of the world according to its substance as an article of faith, but we assert that this opinion is more in conformity with the emphatic statements of Scripture concerning the end of the world. Hence we do not rashly accuse those of heresy who are of the opposite opinion and describe the destruction of the world as transformation. Many therefore would rather reserve judgment in this question...and leave the matter to future experience than take a definite stand now.”¹⁵

Revelation

Our final reference in Holy Scripture to the new heavens and new earth is found in the first verse of Revelation 21:

Καὶ εἶδον οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν. ὁ γὰρ πρῶτος οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ πρώτη γῆ ἀπῆλθαν καὶ ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι.

Literal translation: **And I saw a new heaven and new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and the sea was not again.**

NIV: **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.**

A picture of paradise after God’s judgment is revealed to the apostle John. John uses many Old Testament pictures and allusions in Revelation. These words are a clear reference to Genesis 1:1, as well as the Isaiah passages. What God had first created at the beginning was gone. There was no more sea, either.

In comments that would have probably been better suited for a discussion of 2 Peter 3:13, Lenski wrote:

The newness of the heaven and of the earth shall be like our own. We shall be the same persons and have the same body and the same soul that we now have; but these made entirely new...After body and soul are glorified, we shall be new created, indeed. The same will be true with regard to the new heaven and the new earth. This is no more than an analogy, for man is the creature for whom the first heaven and the first earth were created, and if he is made new by creative acts without first having been annihilated, he the head of all this creation, shall God annihilate heaven and earth and create *ex nihilo* another heaven and earth? Combine what is said here with Romans 8, and the answer is plain.

Among the commentators there seems to be some disagreement regarding the sense and meaning of the new earth not having a sea. Lenski says regarding the sea:

Is the answer too simple, that the function of the sea (ocean) will no longer be needed to supply evaporation, clouds, rain, rivers, and springs, so that men and animals and plants may have the water they need?¹⁶

Regarding the significance of the lack of sea, Luther Poellot quotes L. F. Frerking in *Portals of Prayer* (Friday, April 27, 1956):

To the people of Bible times the sea played a role which caused them to look upon it with eyes of dread. St. John, therefore, could picture nothing more pleasing in the heavenly future than that it would be without sea...the sea also meant separation. Exiled on the lonely island of Patmos in the Mediterranean, he was separated from friends of other years, from comrades in Christ, and from the work to which he had devoted his life. In the picture of the vanished sea John saw the waters which forbade his feet from reaching Ephesus disappear. He sees the dawning of a day when there will be no more separations...¹⁷

¹⁵ F. Pieper, page 543

¹⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963, page 615.

¹⁷ Luther Poellot, *Revelation: The Last Book of the Bible*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1976, page 274.

Kistemaker also considers the reference to the lack of sea as symbolic:

John himself appears to point to a symbolic interpretation by writing a parallel clause that reiterates the same wording: “the sea *was no more*” and “death, grief, crying and pain *will be no more*.”¹⁸

When we consider the opening words of Revelation (1:1), καὶ ἐσήμανεν ἀποστείλας διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ τῷ δούλῳ αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννῃ, the NKJV seems to have the more accurate translation: “*and he sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.*” We would have to agree that John is writing in symbols. Must we not also agree that what John writes about new heavens and a new earth is also symbolic? Pieper understands these words in this way:

In order to give us some conception of the glory of our inheritance, the Bible pictures it to us in terms of this life; e.g., as a wedding (Matt. 25:10; Rev 19:9), as a feast (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29), as a sitting upon thrones (Luke 22:30). Scripture expressly states that these are merely images symbolizing the spiritual bliss of life in heaven in contrast to mundane glory.¹⁹

Adolph Hoenecke writes in a similar way, taking the expression *new heavens and a new earth* symbolically:

In numerous passages Scripture refers to the place where the blessed live as heaven (Mt 5:12; Mk 10:21). Scripture also calls it the third heaven (2 Co 12:2), paradise (Lk 23:43; 2 Co 12:4), Abraham’s side (Lk 16:22), God’s house (Jn 14:2; 2 Co 5:1), the sanctuary or Most Holy Place (Heb 9:12; 10:19), Jerusalem above (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22), the homeland (Heb 11:14), the new heaven and new earth (Isa 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). But why call the place of the blessed a “new earth”?²⁰

After quoting Albertus and Quenstedt, Hoenecke answers his question—and the question asked by the woman in my Revelation Bible class, mentioned in our introduction:

It is surely simpler to explain the expression “new earth” entirely by analogy to the present. “Heaven and earth” is now the totality of our world, and therefore “new heaven and new earth” designates the new, future world.²¹

Summary

The very first verse of the Bible (Gen. 1:1) tells us: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” God’s perfect creation was ruined by man’s disobedience to our loving God. But God promised and sent our Savior, who reconciled us to God and who has promised a restoration of the perfection God originally created—but only better. There will be no opportunity the new heavens and new earth will be plunged again into sin, because the devil has been “*thrown into the lake of burning sulfur,*” Rev. 20:10.

Isaiah was the first of God’s holy writers to write about the new heavens and the new earth. But recall what Pieper said: “New Testament glory and heavenly glory are not sharply distinguished.”²² From the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, Christ’s first coming with its spiritual blessings and his second coming often appear as peaks in a mountain range, all appearing to be lined up next to each other. They often look as if they would occur at the same time. But as you get closer to the mountain range, the peaks are actually far apart. And as we get closer in time to the fulfillment of prophecy, we realize the fulfillments are often separated by many, many years. The apostle Peter is the one who informs us that we look for the new heavens and new earth after the destruction of the current universe on the last day. There will be no sin in this new

¹⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker, New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001, page 555.

¹⁹ F. Pieper, page 552.

²⁰ Adolph Hoenecke, Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol. IV, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, page 354f.

²¹ Hoenecke, page 355.

²² A. Pieper, page 675.

creation. In the apostle John's vision of the new heavens and new earth, there was no longer any sea. John goes on to describe the new heavens and new earth in this way:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Rev. 21:2-5.

God does not tell us a great deal about the state of our souls after death and before the resurrection. He tells us that in death our body returns to the ground, but our soul "*returns to God who gave it,*" Eccl. 12:7. Jesus tells us Lazarus the beggar died and was carried to Abraham's side, but the rich man died and found himself in hell, Luke 16:22, 23. Our Lord told the thief on the cross next to him, "*today you will be with me in paradise,*" Luke 23:43. As he was being stoned to death, Stephen prayed, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,*" Acts 7:59.

But the focus of the eternal blessings our risen and victorious Christ has earned for us by his perfect life and innocent death is centered on the resurrection and the eternal life that follows. Job longed for the day when he would see his Redeemer God with his very own eyes on the last day, Job 19:23-27. Paul told the Philippians that Christ "*will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body,*" Phil. 3:21. Paul also looked forward to the last day when he would receive "*the crown of righteousness,*" 2 Tim. 4:8. And then we have the wonderful resurrection chapter of the New Testament—1 Corinthians 15. The new heavens and new earth make up the new universe in which we will live with the triune God for all eternity in our resurrected and glorified bodies.

We conclude with this quote from Franz Pieper, reminding us of the importance of always holding this sure hope before the eyes our people:

Just as the doctrine of eternal damnation is to be a deterrent against unbelief and carnal security lest men perish, so the doctrine of eternal life is to be an incentive to men to believe in the Gospel and persevere in faith that they may obtain eternal life. A Christian life uncharted and unmotivated by the sure hope of eternal life is inconceivable. We must remember that here on earth Christians, like Christ Himself, are woefully underrated. To keep up their courage and Christian morale, they follow the directions of Christ and fix their gaze on the eternal blessedness awaiting them in heaven.²³

²³ F. Pieper, page 555.