

# 12. The Life Everlasting Begins

## The New Paradise

After the official judgment, the believers will be placed on the new heaven and earth. While the judgment is happening, however, there will be cataclysmic events taking place with respect to the old earth and heaven. “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” (2 Pet 3:10). We learn from this passage that everything will be destroyed in what we might call the great “meltdown” after the Rapture. This again demonstrates that there is one return of Christ and an accompanying Rapture.

The destruction by fire about which Peter writes is echoed in Revelation 20 where the “lake of fire” is mentioned. The old heaven and earth will disappear, and a new heaven and earth will take its place. As the believers are renewed, so their habitat will be restored.

The difference and distance between heaven and earth, which was already bridged in the incarnation of the Son and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, will become completely non-existent: “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.” (Rev 21:3)

We should note that the new heaven and earth will be one. This will be even better than it was in Paradise. Then, God lived in heaven and came down to walk with his children (Gen 3:8). But on the new heaven and earth, he will *live* with them in unbroken fellowship. The new Paradise will be much better than the old Paradise ever was.

## No Comparison

On the one hand, we have no way to compare the perfect, eternal life that will be granted to believers. It is beyond any comparison. We are dealing

here with quantities and qualities that are unknown to us. The apostle Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 2:9, where he writes, “However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him....”

This can refer to present blessings in Christ but can also refer to the glory that we will receive: “our glory before time began” (1 Cor 3:7). Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4, where we find, “Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.”

The glory of the new heaven and earth will be unequalled and unparalleled. Human words fail to describe it. Still, the Lord has given us some idea of what this life will be like, often by telling us what will *not* be present. This may seem a bit negative, but we must remember that we have no other comparison than the present life. What occupies us here and befalls us here will not be there.

## A Perfect Life with God and One Another

Many have said that the wicked will be annihilated and no longer exist. But the Bible does not say this. Instead, we learn that the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire. They will be “outside” the presence and grace of God. Although the Bible does not teach that the soul of man is immortal, still all people will be raised from the dead and affected by the last judgment. There will be everlasting “death” for the unbelievers and everlasting “life” for the believers.

The life everlasting means for believers that life will be fully renewed. It will be nothing less than a completely new start. The Bible refers to this life as “the renewal of all things” (Matt 19:28) and the restoration of everything (Acts 3:21). We cannot fully comprehend the impact of this regeneration and restoration.

The first blessing of the new earth is that we will experience perfect fellowship with God. This has been called the spiritual blessing. To see God face-to-face and live in his presence is unimaginable for us.

Perhaps the greatest blessing of the new life will indeed be that we will see God *face to face*, something which older scholars have termed the “visio Dei.” This is prophesied in I Corinthians 13:12, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see *face to face*. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully even as I am fully known.” The NIV notes capture the sentiment exactly, “The Christian will know the Lord to the fullest extent possible for a finite being, similar to the way the Lord knows the Christian fully and infinitely. This will not be true until the Lord returns.”

We remain finite beings. On the new earth man does not become God. Yet he may fully see, experience and enjoy God in all His riches. This is what Job referred to when he said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes – I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27).

## Intra-personal blessings

There will be blessings also on the intra-personal level. We will have a glorified body, a body that knows of pleasure and satisfaction. It is very clear that “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4). With the passing away of the old world, the order of the old world (the flow and pattern of events in life today) will be history.

The question is often asked if there will be *recognition* of believers whom we have known or heard of on the old earth. Will we recognize people from the past?

Some say no, for recognition would also mean that we miss those who are not present. I do not think that this will be the case, for we will always glorify God for his righteous judgment. We will therefore not miss people in the sense that we can now miss someone. Why would we not recognize fellow Christians who walked with us a path of faith? Are we as believers now and then not one household and family?

We may answer the question positively, believing that we will recognize the saints of old and those with whom we lived in a communion that is much deeper than it ever was on this earth. I do not think we should go beyond this point in our answer.

Some are even convinced that we will recognize the patriarchs and apostles, and finally receive the opportunity to ask them the questions that were left unanswered in this life. It is a tantalizing suggestion, but there is no evidence for this in the Bible. We will know all things fully and will not need to go around asking all kinds of questions. As quoted earlier, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, we read, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” In these things, too, we must not go farther than Scripture allows.

## Will there be degrees of bliss?

Another question that is often asked is, “Will there be ‘degrees of bliss’ in the new life? Will some people have a higher place and be more content or fulfilled than others?” There are passages in Scripture that suggest this. I think of the passage in which we are told that the apostles who have followed Christ will “sit on twelve thrones” (Matt 19:28) and the passage where we read about thrones in heaven (Rev 4:4). A throne does suggest privilege and power over others.

If there will be some difference of place and position, it will not be like any distinction that we know today. We will look at all things differently than we do in this life. What may appear to be problematic from this side will not be a problem at all on the other side, because on the new earth there will be no problems.

## Will there be “earthly” pleasures on the new earth?

Often the question comes to us whether basic earthly pleasures of today will exist on the new earth and heaven. By basic pleasures, I assume, most people mean having a special task, eating food and drink, and enjoying the gift of sexuality. Will we have pets? Will there überhaupt be any animals?

In the first paradise, as described in Genesis 2, there certainly were all these things. That paradise no longer exists. What do remain are the gifts of God to his children. Whatever role these material matters will play on the new earth is not clear; it is clear that they will not have the same function as today.

In his discourse with the Sadducees, described in Matthew 23, the Lord makes clear, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.” The reference to angels can mean that they were all created at one time and did not need to procreate, but it can also mean that since angels are ministering spirits they have not the physical characteristics required for sexual experience. Sexuality does not play a role in their lives.

The point is not that there will be no gender difference on the new earth. We will still be male and female, and somehow this will be functional. The point is that procreation will not take place, for as the number of angels is complete, so the number of the elect is full. There are no more generations to be expected. Hence the institution of marriage will be superfluous. It would appear that in this context the role of sexuality has changed.

There will be no family structure as we have it now. It is unclear how exactly man and woman will relate to each other on the new earth, but it will be in righteousness and holiness, and that already makes it different than today. But does this also mean that the gift of sexual enjoyment will be removed?

Usually, I request those who want to know more about the perfect life on the new earth to focus on their present situation rather than speculate on a future situation. In the present, it is important that we persevere in faith and obedience rather than curiously seek after what will be revealed over us. We can be told all kinds of things about a certain place, but when we get there, we conclude that it is still different and better than we thought. The new reality will exceed all old expectations.

The Bible does not say that on the new earth there will be no food to enjoy. On the contrary, we read in Revelation 22:2 that on both banks of the

river of life stands the tree of life, “bearing twelve crops of food, yielding its fruit every month...” We will not need to eat to stay alive, for death and disease does not exist anymore, but food can also be given for enjoyment. We do not know how this will take place.

Will there be animals on the new earth? Animals belonged to the beauty of this creation, and there is no reason to assume that they will not exist in the new creation. The dominion of mankind over all creatures will somehow be evident. But we will not relate to animals as we did on this earth.

## Will we have a specific task on the new earth?

Will we work and have a specific job on the new earth? The Biblical emphasis is that we may *rest* from our (difficult, earthly) labors. The new life is called “the eternal Sabbath.” But in the Bible “resting” never means doing nothing. It always means an opportunity to do other things of importance.

In his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kok, 1957, Volume 4, page 709) H. Bavinck admits that Christian theology has not paid much attention to the activities we will be engaged in on the new earth, for the focus was rather on a knowing and enjoying of God, but he asserts that we will all be quite occupied with our *various callings*.

We will be active in knowing God and serving Him and governing His creation with Christ. Bavinck writes, “The great diversity, which exists in all kinds of form in humanity, will not be destroyed in eternity, but purified of sin will shine even more and made to serve the fellowship with God and one another.” We will be fully able to employ all our talents and gifts to God’s glory.

Come to think of it in this way, the new life will not only be fully one of many pleasant surprises but also one of satisfying activity in which we finally get the opportunity truly to glorify God and show our love to our neighbor. In this way we finally perfectly fulfill the law of God.

## How Do We Prepare For the Rapture?

And so we face the coming Rapture. The question is how we shall prepare for it. We have to be *ready*. The problem is that we do not know how to get ready. We need to be exhorted and instructed. In this respect, we need to be living members of Christ's faithful church, where his Word is preached in accordance with Scriptures. Especially in the time of the great tribulation and the coming Rapture, it makes a great difference where we have our spiritual base.

Perhaps best of all, we should go to the Scriptures to find out what is needed to prepare for the Rapture. It is wise to consider passages that speak to us of the last days, and what is expected of us and promised to us.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:18, after the Rapture is explained, the apostle writes, "Therefore encourage one another with these words." The teaching about the Rapture is meant to *encourage* and not to *discourage* us. The great tribulation will be more difficult than life generally is, and therefore we need to be encouraged. Only the glad tidings of salvation and redemption will help us persevere in the faith. Christians need to stay positive, for the night is far-gone and the dawn is near.

Paul also writes to the Thessalonians that they must be "alert and self-controlled" (1 Thess 5:6). This is in keeping with all passages that speak about the last times. We are told to stay alert, be awake, hold the line, be controlled, and stand firm.

After Paul has written about the great resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he writes in verse 58, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Christians may never be quitters.

## Well equipped for the final battle

I find it striking that many admonitions and encouragements which follow the rapture texts are often set in military terms. This may serve to

underscore the fact that in the last age we are also involved in the final battle.

The war has been won at Calvary. But the final battle, leading to the ultimate Armageddon will demand all our strength and effort. Therefore we need to put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). We need to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Then nothing can stop us or discourage us. We need to seek and use the equipment that God has given us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

The road to the Rapture lies open. Nothing can stop us now.