

C. The New Heavens and Earth

God's eternal intention for His creation is entirely bound up in Jesus Christ. Paul expressed this christocentric destiny as the "*summing up of all things in the heavens and earth in Christ*" (Ephesians 1:9-10). The meaning of this "summing up" is that every created thing is to find the ultimacy of its identity, significance, and purpose in relation to Christ. All things have their substance and subsistence in Him and were created for Him; the entire creation is *christotelic* as well as *christogenic* – it both originates and reaches its terminus in Christ (Colossians 1:15-17).

- The most obvious way in which this is true is that Christ is the source of the creation's deliverance and renewal with respect to the curse. All things enter into the perfection of the eternal state in and through Him and His redemptive work.
- But, beyond this, the created order finds its destiny in Christ because He is the fulfillment of sacred space. As the God-Man, Jesus is uniquely God's sanctuary; *He is the point of interface between the Creator and His creation, so that all things are related to God in and through Him*. Even as God determined to exercise His dominion over His creation through man, the unique image-son, so man finds his true and consummate humanity in the singular image-Son. The origin and destiny of man are in Christ.

1. Creational Renewal and the Consummation of Sacred Space

God's larger goal for the creation is fundamental to discerning the meaning of the "new heavens and earth." Traced through its various lines of development, the scriptural storyline reveals that God's ultimate intention for His creation isn't merely its reconstitution or rejuvenation, but the realization of its true purpose in relation to Himself in and through Jesus Christ.

God's eternal intention is that the whole created order will finally become sacred space. The goal of the Creator wasn't creational perfection as such, but *relational* perfection; the created order was to serve as the domain of Creator-creature intimacy.

- a. God's intimate presence within the creation was realized with the Incarnation: The divine presence was fully manifested in the creaturely realm when "*the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us,*" revealing in fullness the glory of God as the divine Son (ref. John 1:1-2, 14-18; cf. also Hebrews 1:1-3).
- b. In the person of the incarnate Son, the Creator and His creation were at last reconciled and brought into the most intimate communion: In Christ all the fullness of *deity* dwells *bodily* (Colossians 2:9). But this realization of sacred space looked beyond Christ to the creature who is image-bearer: In Him, man "*has been made complete*" (Colossians 2:10). Paul understood this completion as man sharing in Christ's fullness as the dwelling of God. In Christ, man has attained the spiritual identity and intimacy for which he was created; in Christ man has become God's sanctuary as *image-son*.

- c. But man is God's *royal* image-son: That is, he was appointed to bear the divine likeness and live in perfect communion with His Creator-Father in order to rule in His name and on His behalf. What began in Christ extends through Him as the Last Adam to the new race of men: God determined that His presence and lordship with respect to His creation should be mediated through His image-bearer – preeminently in the person of the singular Image-Son, but also in those who share His likeness (2 Timothy 2:11-12). Man is personally and uniquely the divine dwelling place, but his presence in the created order as vice-regent effectively makes the entire realm of his habitation the sanctuary of God.

This connection is most explicit in John's vision of the new heavens and earth in Revelation 21-22. It is eminently appropriate that this should be the case since this vision brings God's revelation of His eternal purpose and its consummate fulfillment to its greatest biblical expression.

- John introduced his vision by explaining that it represented a symbolic revelation of the new heavens and new earth (21:1). Its presence meant that the former created order – the first heavens and earth (Genesis 1:1) – had passed away, and John took specific note that there was no *sea* in the new order. This is a powerful metaphor when understood in terms of the biblical symbolism attached to the sea.

First, the sea was a central feature of the creation along with the heavens (sky and firmament) and the earth (dry land). But the sea also symbolizes the powers of chaos and rebellion that operate in the created order. The Israelites were not a seafaring people and so regarded the “deep” as an unknown, mysterious, and foreboding realm (Job 38:16-17; Jonah 2:3-6). The sea is also a restless and untamed entity that continually presses against its divinely established boundaries and that only God can subdue (Job 7:12, 26:12, 38:8-11, 41:31-32; Psalm 74:13-14, 89:9; Isaiah 57:20; Jeremiah 5:22). Extending this imagery, the sea then serves as a metaphor for the principle of spiritual rebellion against God (Isaiah 27:1).

The following citation from the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery sheds light on the significance of there being no sea in the new creation: “*The Bible adapts its neighbors’ creation myths of a primeval battle between a creator god and a sea monster of chaos called Leviathan, Rahab, or the dragon or serpent (Job 41). Unlike the myths of neighboring nations, God creates the chaos monster and places it in the sea (Gen 1:20-21; Ps 104:24-6). The monster stirs the cosmic sea but is wounded and subdued by God and will ultimately be vanquished in the end times. As the home of the chaos monster who can be roused, the sea symbolizes the threat of the reemergence of chaos (Job 3:8). In fact, the evil world powers and the antichrist of the last days which oppose God and his people are symbolized as beasts arising from the sea (Dan 7:3; Rev 13:1).*”

John's observation at the vision's outset that the new created order lacks a sea expresses the central truth that, in the consummation of the last day, no form or threat of opposition to God and the peace and security of His kingdom rule will ever present itself again. All disorder, unsettledness, and rebellion will be vanquished in the shalomic shabbat of the new order.

- But as John sees the new creation of the new heavens and earth, it presents itself as a city, namely the *New Jerusalem* (21:2). The convergence of these symbols in the vision indicates that the Lord's sanctuary – represented by Jerusalem as His dwelling place – will have then embraced the whole created order. A couple of other observations reinforce this:

1) The first is that the city is represented as an immense Holy of Holies possessing the glory of God as a permanent endowment (21:9-16; cf. Exodus 40:33-34; 1 Kings 8:1-11). There was no need for a temple in the city since the entire space constituted the sanctuary-throne of the Lord God and the Lamb (21:22; cf. Jeremiah 3:16-18; Zechariah 2:1-13).

2) Secondly, the heavenly city was revealed to John to be the full extent of sacred space; everything outside of it represents the realm of "ichabod" and condemnation (cf. 21:24-27 with 22:14-15).

- The New Jerusalem also notably appears as a *bride*, linking the city with the Church as the wife of the Lamb (21:2, 9-10; cf. John 3:29; Ephesians 5:22-29; Revelation 19:6-9, 22:17). This correspondence draws directly upon the Old Testament's representation of Zion (Jerusalem) as Yahweh's covenant wife. God's intimacy with the covenant nation was expressed by the image of Jerusalem as the wife who bears children for Him (cf. Isaiah 50:1 with 49:14-21 and 54:1-13; also Hosea 2:1-20).

God's intimacy with His people is the central signification in this bride imagery and is reinforced by the fact that the concept of *sanctuary* is the point of connection between the New Jerusalem and the Church. After seeing the city presented as a bride, a voice from God's throne proclaimed the vision's meaning: *The descent of the heavenly Jerusalem signified that God's dwelling is now consummately among men*; they are His, forever at rest and secure in the place of His habitation (21:3; cf. 3:12).

In pointed contrast with the former earthly Jerusalem, the citizens of New Jerusalem have their home in the consummate Holy of Holies rather than merely pass into it as wary visitors; they *dwell* where God dwells. And more than that, they do so as bona fide *sons*, identified as such by the Lord of the sanctuary Himself (21:7). The closeness to God enjoyed by the city's residents isn't spatial as much as *relational*: They are beloved children of a devoted Father – royal sons in the Son (1:4-6, 3:5, 21, 14:1).

2. Sacred Space and the Final Judgment

Though the final judgment has been a topic of great interest to Christians and theologians over the centuries, few seem to take note of the larger salvation-historical context in which it occurs and to which it pertains. Most Christians associate the final judgment with the consummation of the present age, but it is far less common for them to connect it with the core issue in the consummation, namely the full and final realization of God's eternal purpose for sacred space.

The basis for this connection isn't the fact that the final judgment is a step in the process that culminates with the rendering of the whole creation as God's dwelling place. *Rather, it's that the Scripture makes the realization of sacred space the frame of reference for the reckoning and disposition that transpire with that judgment event.*

- a. The final judgment will summon every person who has ever lived to stand before the bar of God. Each one's life will be scrutinized and all will be judged on the basis of their relation to God and His gospel as it was fulfilled in His Son.
 - In His discourse on the Mount of Olives Jesus indicated that, at His return, the "sheep" and "goats" will be distinguished on the basis of their relationship with Him expressed in their treatment of His brethren (Matthew 25:31-46). But elsewhere He was more direct that the singular criterion in the judgment day will be a person's relation to Him (cf. Matthew 7:21-23, 8:1-12, 21:23-44, 25:1-12; Luke 13:23-30).
 - So Paul insisted that the issue in God's final reckoning will be true knowledge of Him evidenced in a person's embrace of and conformity to the gospel of His Son (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; cf. 2:8-12).
 - Peter similarly linked the winnowing of the final judgment with how a person regards Christ, His gospel, and the renewal that He has inaugurated and is bringing to consummation (2 Peter 3:1-15).

Jesus Christ stands as the point of winnowing for the human race precisely because, in Him, God has physically entered the realm of the creation in order to openly reveal and accomplish His intention to recover His creation back to Himself. In Christ, sacred space has been restored, so that failure to be reconciled to God through faith in His Son constitutes denial and rejection of the new order.

- b. But the relation between the final judgment and the consummate realization of sacred space is most powerfully demonstrated in the disposition of men coming out of judgment. As the result of Christ's scrutiny of every man's life, He will *receive* and *embrace* some while others are *sent away from His presence* into the darkness and desolation of eternal destruction (ref. Matthew 7:21-23, 8:1-12, 22:1-13, 25:40-41; Luke 13:22-30; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; cf. also 2 Peter 2:1-17; Jude 1-13; etc.).

Separation from the Lord in condemnation is further described as being *outside*. This imagery is important in that it introduces the concept of *locale* and implies the existence of an “inside” reserved for those whom Christ receives to Himself. It is in this regard that the theme of sacred space comes to the forefront in the final judgment and its outcome, and it appears under three related images.

- The first is the image of the *kingdom of God*, and it notably has particular reference to the sons of Israel. They, rather than the Gentiles, lived in the hope of the promised kingdom, and so it was appropriate that Jesus explained the outcome of their disbelief and rejection of Him in terms of their being cast out of God’s kingdom (ref. again Matthew 8:1-12, 21:33-43, 22:1-13; Luke 13:22-30). In context, to be “cast out” is to be cut off from the presence and fellowship of Yahweh and His King.
- The second is the image of a *wedding feast* (Matthew 22:1-13, 25:1-12; Luke 14:15-24; Revelation 19:1-9; cf. also Luke 13:22-30; John 3:22-29). Those who refuse the master’s invitation or arrive without the appropriate garments will be left outside, unable to partake in the celebration.
- The notion of “outside” finds its pinnacle expression in the imagery of the *New Jerusalem* (Revelation 21:23-27, 22:14-15; cf. Hebrews 12:18-24). As with its typological counterpart, the heavenly Jerusalem signifies the place of God’s dwelling and the seat of His throne. Therefore, to be outside the city – which is illumined by the Lord’s presence – is to be in outer darkness away from Him.

All three set forth a place/realm into which some men enter while others are left outside. The indication in every instance is that “inside” or “outside” pertains to every person; there is no third option. Moreover, each of these realms speaks to sacred space in that they emphasize the presence of the Lord/master and His communion with those granted entrance.

3. Sacred Space and the Eternal State

The consummate kingdom is the full realization of sacred space – *God with us*. This creational destiny was first portrayed in Eden and then made a matter of promise at the time of the Fall. Later, it was realized prototypically in Israel and then in actuality in Christ. In the present age the kingdom as sacred space is being manifested in the Church, but in the last day it will reach its consummation when the Spirit transforms the entire creation. Then, as the whole created order is at last “summed up in Christ,” the Creator-Father will have brought about the consummate fullness of sacred space.

In that day John’s final vision will have been fully realized: The new heavens and earth as the renewed creation, the Church as the Bride, and the New Jerusalem as the sanctuary and throne of God and the Lamb will together constitute sacred space; in that day, God will forever be “*all in all*” (1 Corinthians 15:25-28).