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We Look for the Life of the World to Come

This is the confession and confidence of every believer: Life with God does not end on earth but moves to a new place called heaven. Our bodies will be raised and restored when Jesus comes in glory and they will reunite with our souls to live with God forever. What will heaven be like? The Christian author C. S. Lewis wrote, "We know not what we shall be; but we may be sure we shall be more, not less, than we were on earth."

Sermon

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Of all the questions we have about things religious and spiritual, I think we have more questions about heaven than about anything else. We're all pretty sure we're going to heaven. I mean, Jesus said: "Whoever believes will not perish but have everlasting life" and we know that we believe in Jesus. What we're not so sure of is what heaven will be like. So we have questions. Some questions have answers. How long will heaven last? Answer: Forever. Some questions don't have answers: Where is heaven? We don't know. In the Gospel for today, the Sadducees, who didn't believe there even was a heaven, tried to stump Jesus with a question. He had the answer, but it only answered their question. Nothing more. So we still have questions.

I guess I'm not surprised that we don't have nearly as many questions about the Garden of Eden. At least I haven't heard them. For one thing, we don't spend much time on the Garden of Eden. It usually gets one lesson a year in Sunday School. We know it was perfect and that it was beautiful. The Bible calls it Paradise. The biggest problem is that the story of the Garden of Eden is mostly negative. That's where the serpent was hiding in a tree and slithered down to talk to Eve. Eve bit on his lie and then bit on the fruit and then convinced Adam to bite, too. Everything went downhill from there. God forced Adam and Eve out of the Garden and posted an angel at the garden gate to keep them out. What happened at the Garden of Eden still plagues us. Why ask questions about Paradise when we don't have it anymore?

When Jesus gave John a vision of the future of the church, he showed John heaven. What John saw is really magnificent even though the language is often symbolic—it's a picture of something better. But then at the very end of the Revelation, Jesus gave John one last look and what John saw seems a lot like the Garden of Eden. John sees a river and there was a river in Eden. John sees the Tree of Life and the Tree of Life was in the Garden of Eden. He sees a curse—there was a curse in the Garden of Eden—although the curse is gone in John's vision. He sees the kind of friendship with God that existed in Eden. When we read what John wrote about this vision, we almost get the impression that heaven is nothing more but nothing less than Paradise restored. We sense that heaven is the recreation of Eden, that God is going to take us back to the place where creation began, that we will live forever just as God created us to be. Actually, this isn't an impression at all. This is what John saw and this is what Jesus wanted John to see. Jesus wanted John to know and Jesus wants us to know that:

At the End We Will Return to the Beginning

God was furious with Satan. Satan inserted sin into God's perfect world and sin ruined everything. God put a curse on Satan and sin put a curse on earth and human beings. But God never lost control. He warned Satan what was coming: **I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head but you will bruise his heel.** And then God went to work to put that plan into action. He sent his only Son as the seed of the woman. Jesus was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. But he was also truly human. As true God and true man he was able to carry out God's plan. He stood under God's law as a human and obeyed it perfectly as God. He endured the divine punishment for sin as a man but offered it for the whole world as God. When Jesus died, the great curtain of the temple which separated from God was torn in two and Jesus had completed God's plan—even in death he had crushed Satan's head. He rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven, he lives and rules over all the earth. With all that accomplished, Jesus took John to heaven and what John saw looks a lot like the Garden of Eden.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. There was a river in the garden of Eden too. God created the river to give life to all the plants and all the people of Paradise. Eventually, it broke into four tributaries and watered all of the middle east. But everything changed after the fall into sin. Sometimes the rivers stopped running and brought drought. Sometimes they ran too high and brought flooding. Sometimes they filled with mud and silt and wrecked ships. The rivers were filled with dead bodies.

John sees a river in heaven, too. This river gives life, too, but not necessarily to plants and animals. This river contains the water of life which keeps all the inhabitants of heaven alive. It flows down the middle of the great street so that it can give life to everyone. It's a river that comes from God, too, but also from the Lamb because the life in heaven exists because the Lamb of God took away the sins of the world. Nothing muddies this water. It shimmers with purity. Nothing needs to be added; we won't build dikes around this river to control it or build dams to empower it. We don't need to do anything to contribute to our life in heaven because the river flows from the throne of God and the Lamb.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. God planted the tree of life in the middle of the garden. In its own miraculous way, the tree of life enabled Adam and Eve to live forever. But God planted another tree in the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve were not to eat of this tree or they would die. But of course, they ate. Life changed. Disaster and disease entered the world. Wouldn't it have been horrible to live forever with smallpox or Alzheimer's or cancer? So God placed an angel to guard the tree of life so that life would come to an end.

The tree of life is in heaven, too, and it gives eternal life in the same miraculous and supernatural way. Day after day, month after month, year after year, for ever and ever it produces life-preserving and life-sustaining blessings. The disasters and diseases are gone; no more smallpox, no more Alzheimer's, no more cancer. We will live in perfect health for eternity.

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. In the Garden of Eden, the friendship between God and Adam and Eve was perfect. God walked with them and he talked with them. They were the objects of his affection and he was the object of theirs. There were no distractions; he was their only priority.

But when the curse came the relationship ended. God hated their rebellion and people resented God's anger. Because of sin no one could see God and live. Other attractions and priorities stood between God and his creatures. Other replacements replaced God as the object of human affection.

But when the Lamb's work was done, the curse was gone. Jesus had become the curse for us. The relation between us and God has been mended already, but we still struggle with sinful affections and priorities. We still live with the residue of the curse of sin. But in heaven the curse will be gone for good just as it was in Eden. We will see God face to face. We will have eyes only for him and our lips will sing praise only to him.

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. When he created the world, God created day and night, day for work and pleasure, night for sleep and rest. He created the sun to rule the day and the moon to rule the night. When the curse came, the daylight became a time for sweat and sorrow and the night became a time for sin and savagery.

In heaven, God will still provide the light, but not with a sun or moon. There will be no time for sorrow and no place for sin. God will supply the light from the brilliance of his love and we will live in perfect and eternal sunshine.

What a phenomenon! At the end of time God will take us back to the beginning time to live in a perfect world with his perfect love. The great Christian theologian, C.S. Lewis, wrote: "We know not what we shall be; but we may be sure we shall be more, not less, than we were on earth." And now we all might understand a little better what Jesus meant when he said to that thief on the cross, **Today, you will be with me in Paradise.** Amen.