

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 47 - Chapter 21

The first words of Genesis are: ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen. 1:1 CJB)***. The first words of Revelation chapter 21 are: ***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away (Rev. 21:1 CJB)***. If Genesis 1 is the book of Beginning, then Revelation 21 is the book of a new Beginning; a sort of Genesis the sequel.

We're going to have much to talk about in regards to Revelation 21 and 22; some of it will be theological, and some of it will be scientific. That combination may bother a few of you; however it shouldn't. Science and theology were not always polar opposites.... or even mortal enemies. Until perhaps 300 years ago the brightest minds that studied the stars and the heavens, and the nature of earth, did so in the mindset that they were engaged in a process of discovering what God had done and is doing. What we today would call scientific method was being formulated not to find a naturalistic way of explaining how the Universe was spontaneously created and independently operates, but rather it was to investigate the physical cosmos in order to bring to light the order and function of the God-created Creation.

N.T. Wright says that the essence of theology is "trying to think straight about who God is". That is what Galileo, Copernicus, Sir Isaac Newton and others were attempting in their inquiries and curiosity about the workings of the earth and the vast expanse full of both lights and darkness that floated above their heads. They were specifically seeking the relationships and divine purposes of all these mysterious phenomena. That is the same spirit in which we shall engage our journey of discovery into the new heaven and earth as described in Revelation 21 and 22.

Let's begin by re-reading Revelation 21.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 21 all

Because the relationship between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 21:1 is self-evident, then before we explore the new heavens and earth that we might loosely dub the Re-Creation, let's take a little time to discuss the present heavens and earth that is the original Creation. Let me alleviate some of your worry right up front; this will not be a debate of old earth versus new earth worldviews, nor are we going to essentially re-study the Book of Genesis. Rather we're going to have our discussion on the foundational basis that Seed of Abraham Torah Class was formed; it is that the only credible way to understand the Bible is if we relent from trying to force upon it our modern ways of thinking and how we see the world and the Universe. The Bible is cultural specific. That is to say this ancient book was written by and to Hebrews. It was written in the context of their understanding of the world and the Universe at that time; not ours in the 21st century. It is their perspective that we are seeking to grasp; it is their priorities and concerns and values that (together with their language) form their unique culture. At the same

time the biblical culture in the first 100 years from Adam and Eve, to the time of Noah, and then on to Abraham, and then to Christ and finally to John evolved and changed. Sometimes centuries passed between the times of these several giants of the Bible; and just like today as knowledge and technology advances in our era, it also advanced over those several centuries the Bible covers. Thus so did some of their viewpoints about the earth they lived on, the heavens, and to some degree even about God.

We like to say today that human nature is and has always been universal; and while that may be true, culture is anything but universal. Therefore if we are to discover truth in God's Word we must approach it by admitting that its precious words mean whatever it is that each book's author intended them to mean at the time he wrote them. So let's take a look at how those who wrote the Bible thought about the world and the universe from their cultural perspective.

To begin, they made no separation between the natural and the supernatural as we do today. In fact, the way we think of the word "nature" or "natural" today is not only entirely different from what the ancients thought, it is different from what we English speakers thought only a couple of decades ago. If we look up the word "nature" in a dictionary, it says something on the order of "all physical phenomena including things like weather, organisms, landforms, celestial bodies, humans and much more". Most of us would not argue with that definition of "nature". However within the last 20 years or so, humans have been removed from the classification of being part of "nature" and now humans are more seen as in opposition to, or even an enemy of, nature. But to the biblical writers and to all the many peoples of the Ancient Near East, the word nature had no such meaning. Rather nature merely meant the inherent characteristics of something; that is, God's nature or human nature, for example. Thus we won't find the English word nature or its ancient equivalent in the Bible, Old or New Testaments, which references animals, plants, trees, rivers, the stars, or any such thing. And since that is the case, we also don't find the word "supernatural" nor its equivalent in the Bible.

To the ancients, including in John's era, God or gods controlled and dictated everything that existed and everything that happened. While we look at a beautiful green forest of trees as "nature" and "natural" they would see it more as a product and process strictly brought about by and for the divine. A forest had a certain mystery to it. God or gods were involved in everything; no exceptions. Thus while we modern Believers sub-consciously think of biblical miracles as "supernatural", no such thought would have invaded the mind of a biblical writer. Rather a miracle was merely a particularly awesome or unexpected display of divine power. But it was the same divine power that every day caused new life to be formed in the womb of a mother; a stalk of corn to grow from what seems to be a dead and dried up seed; or water to fall from the clouds to irrigate crops and refill rivers.

Especially as it concerns our study of the new heavens and earth of Revelation and its relationship to the original Creation of Genesis, we must also understand that when we read the Creation story it was not intended as a scientific journal article. There was no intent to explain how or when things were done, but rather **who** did it and **what** the purpose and function of each component of Creation was. As difficult as it might be to wrap our minds around, when we read in Genesis (for example) of the creation of lights in the sky we read nothing about their material nature, but rather only about their place, purpose and function in

the Creation. In the case of the lights, the passage says they were created to inform humans about signs (as communications from God), seasons, days, and years, and to provide light for the earth. Today we look up and think of those lights like the Sun, Moon, Stars, and planets as objects; physical tangible things..... some that with the right technology we could even travel to and visit some day; but the ancients had no such thoughts. The lights in the sky were simply that: light. How that light was emitted was of no interest. The Moon, for instance, was a light and only a light; that early astronomers upon the invention of telescopes in the early 1600's discovered that the Moon was actually a tangible object and not merely a ball of light that went through many phases over a month, was unknown in Bible times.

The ancients pictured the sky as a solid dome with the lights sort of embossed on it. They called it the firmament, and since Genesis tells us that God made this dome and He did it to separate the water above it from the water below it (the seas), what else could the sky be but something solid and impenetrable if its purpose was to hold back the celestial water? They had no technology to explore their assumption and see how God might have done this. Besides; their interest was not in how or when these things happened, but rather what the order and function of those things were and where they, as humans, fit into it all.

As perhaps one last example that hits a little closer to home, later when God gave Moses the Torah, God provided a list of items that were permissible as food for His worshippers. Today among those who are committed to eating kosher, many think that those items make up the healthiest of all possible diets. And that the reason God allowed certain animals to be eaten but not others is because of their health effects. But that is not how the biblical writers thought. Illness and bad health for them was but a function of their relationship with their God or gods. Illness was seen as a punishment for displeasing behavior. They had no knowledge of germs, or bacteria, or the human metabolism, or cellular reproduction, etc. Those items Moses said were suitable for food was a dictate from the God of Israel for His own good reasons and nothing more. There was no real discernable logic to it as it seems many today keep trying to find, because that's the way our Greek oriented modern minds have been taught to think. Every effect has a cause; every cause has an effect. To the ancients cause and effect were a function of the gods. To us moderns, cause and effect is a function of our choices and behaviors or the result of the physical properties of some object or organism.

In the time that Moses lived, there was no thought about what physical objects consisted of. A rock was a rock. Wood was wood. Water was water. Therefore we won't read about any such things as "elements" in the Creation account in Genesis. And yet, by New Testament times, the idea of every physical thing that existed consisting of some combination of known elements was well established (those elements being only 4: earth, wind, water, and fire). Even the Apostle Peter thought in terms of the earth and the Universe consisting of elements as its basic underlying structure (and we'll soon read about that).

I've told you all this for one reason: to encourage you to put aside your notions and even good verifiable knowledge about how our physical world and Universe operates as you read the Bible and as we read the last 2 books of Revelation. First because the Bible was not written for that purpose, and second because what the biblical writers knew and how they perceived their world and communicated it is entirely different than how you or I do. We have to try to enter

their minds and their world in order to extract the truth we seek in order to cross the vast barriers of time and culture and properly apply it to our lives in our world.

The next thing I want to explore is the amazing connection between redemption and creation. Paul makes that connection for us in 2nd Corinthians.

CJB 2 Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is united with the Messiah, he is a new creation- the old has passed; look, what has come is fresh and new!*

Becoming united with Christ is Paul's way of saying "redeemed" in this narrative, and he says that being re-created is the automatic result of being redeemed. And by the way for those who love the King James Bible (and it is a very good Bible), this is one verse that has been poorly translated. Instead of becoming a new "creation", the KJV says we become a new "creature". The Greek word being translated is ***ktisis*** and it speaks of a process, not an object. ***Ktisis*** is the process of founding or establishing something; it is not the thing itself. Believers become the visible tangible evidence of the process of new creation that itself is proof of our redemption; but we don't become new creatures. Thus human redemption inherently involves an act of creation (or better re-creation). It moves us from something old to something new. This same God-principle extends to the earth and the Universe. In fact to use the language that I have used in other lessons, I would say that it extends to everything that makes up the 4 dimensional Universe in which we live and can observe. So God is not out to simply redeem humanity; rather He has always been out to redeem His entire creation. Humankind is important to God; but we're not everything or the only thing of value in His Creation. For when Adam sinned it didn't just introduce evil and decay into himself, or only into mankind that would spring from him, but rather it infected every aspect of our 4 dimensional Universe. Therefore God determined He would have to redeem it all. And since God's designed redemption process inherently involves re-creating, that is what we witness beginning with the first words of Revelation chapter 21: ***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away (Rev. 21:1 CJB)***

Paul was not the first to fully recognize this principle and connection of redemption with re-creation. The Prophet Isaiah laid it out in Isaiah 65. We won't read it all so I'll set the scene. God is discipling and calling out inhabitants of earth for their unfaithfulness. At the same time He is going to deliver them (redeem them) from their grievous offenses against Him. And then it all winds up with something new.

CJB Isaiah 65:1 - 6 ¹ "I made myself accessible to those who didn't ask for me, I let myself be found by those who didn't seek me. I said, 'Here I am! Here I am!' to a nation not called by my name. ² I spread out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who live in a way that is not good, who follow their own inclinations; ³ a people who provoke me to my face all the time, sacrificing in gardens and burning incense on bricks. ⁴ They sit among the graves and spend the night in caverns; they eat pig meat and their pots hold soup made from disgusting things. ⁵ They say, 'Keep your distance, don't come near me, because I am holier than you.' These are smoke in my nose, a fire that burns all day! ⁶ See, it is written before me; I will not be silent until I repay them; I will repay them to the full.....

Moving down a few verses:

CJB Isaiah 65:9-12 ⁹ *I will bring forth descendants from Ya'akov, heirs of my mountains from Y'hudah; my chosen ones will possess them, and my servants will live there.* ¹⁰ *The Sharon will be a pasture for flocks, the Akhor Valley a place for cattle to rest, for my people who have sought me.* ¹¹ *"But as for you who abandon ADONAI, who forget my holy mountain, who prepare a table for a Gad, a god of luck, and fill bowls of mixed wine for Meni, a god of destiny-* ¹² *I will destine you to the sword, you will all bow down to be slaughtered; because when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did what was evil from my point of view and chose what did not please me."*

And then finally:

CJB Isaiah 65:16-17 ¹⁶ *Thus someone on earth who blesses himself will bless himself by the God of truth, and someone on earth who swears an oath will swear by the God of truth; for past troubles will be forgotten, hidden from my eyes.* ¹⁷ *"For, look! I create new heavens and a new earth; past things will not be remembered, they will no more come to mind.*

So even though I wonder if Isaiah or His audience really comprehended the fully literal nature of God creating a new heavens and a new earth in the future, the important principle was established that redemption and re-creation cannot be separated from one another; it comes as a package deal. But we must also not overlook that Isaiah prophesied the creation of a new heavens and earth to replace the existing ones 8 centuries before John's day. This is knowledge that didn't escape that simple fisherman, Peter, although I suspect that it was His Master, Yeshua, that taught this to him in one of the many encounters He had with His 12 Disciples that aren't recorded in the New Testament.

CJB 2 Peter 3:1 - 13 ¹ *Dear friends, I am writing you now this second letter; and in both letters I am trying to arouse you to wholesome thinking by means of reminders;* ² *so that you will keep in mind the predictions of the holy prophets and the command given by the Lord and Deliverer through your emissaries.*

³ *First, understand this: during the Last Days, scoffers will come, following their own desires* ⁴ *and asking, "Where is this promised 'coming' of his? For our fathers have died, and everything goes on just as it has since the beginning of creation."* ⁵ *But, wanting so much to be right about this, they overlook the fact that it was by God's Word that long ago there were heavens, and there was land which arose out of water and existed between the waters,* ⁶ *and that by means of these things the world of that time was flooded with water and destroyed.*

⁷ *It is by that same Word that the present heavens and earth, having been preserved, are being kept for fire until the Day of Judgment, when ungodly people will be destroyed.*

⁸ *Moreover, dear friends, do not ignore this: with the Lord, one day is like a thousand*

years and a thousand years like one day⁹ ***The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some people think of slowness; on the contrary, he is patient with you; for it is not his purpose that anyone should be destroyed, but that everyone should turn from his sins.***

¹⁰ However, the Day of the Lord will come "like a thief." On that Day the heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will melt and disintegrate, and the earth and everything in it will be burned up. ¹¹ Since everything is going to be destroyed like this, what kind of people should you be? You should lead holy and godly lives, ¹² as you wait for the Day of God and work to hasten its coming. That Day will bring on the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt from the heat; ¹³ but we, following along with his promise, wait for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness will be at home.

Peter recognizes the connection between redemption and re-creation. He speaks of a literal new heavens and new earth. But what is even more fascinating is that because by his time the belief was well established that all physical things were composed of elements (something that modern science agrees with) he even gives us the means by which the old heavens and earth will disappear and a new heavens and earth will replace them. He says that the elements that currently form all things will melt and disintegrate and it will be caused by intense heat. However this is not something the redeemed should worry about; rather it should be welcomed because he says: "But we, following along with His (Christ's) promise, wait for the new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness will be at home". That is, whereas the current heavens and earth have been irretrievably corrupted by evil and sin and so that has become its nature, righteousness is NOT at home in the Universe. But the nature of the new heavens and earth will be inherently righteousness.

So the new heavens and earth will not be a redecorating, remodeling, or a thorough scrubbing of sin out of the old. While because of God patterns and principles the new heavens and earth will have some familiarities and similarities to the old, all will be brand new right down to the elemental level. I want to take a minute or two to tell you how scientists now believe "creation" happened; and after our discussion I think you'll notice how biblically familiar it sounds. And, believe me, on the one hand scientists are thrilled to discover this creation process; but on the other it leaves them with an uncomfortable dilemma that they have no means to solve. The dilemma is that lacking another explanation, something or some one has to have initiated the creation process and whatever it was had to exist before it began.

The most currently accepted theory of creation in the scientific world is that a long time ago all matter and energy was compacted down to a tiny point. Essentially that tiny point WAS the entire Universe. Then for some inexplicable reason it exploded and expanded at an unimaginable rate. What is important for our purposes today is that through years of scientific inquiry, the evidence is clear and consistent that the first elements formed in the Universe (the first building blocks of the physical, material Universe), were the simplest ones: hydrogen and helium. Those two elements still comprise the bulk of free floating elements in the Universe. But, with the intense heat of the creation explosion still lingering, these hydrogen and helium elements by means of the process of continuing fusion added more electrons and protons to

their atoms and became other elements. And through that same intense heat, those other and newer elements fused together with yet other free floating electrons and protons and became even more elements. In time elements like nitrogen and oxygen, carbon, and even heavy metals like iron and gold were formed. Then as the amount of them increased they collided with each other, clung together, and formed enough mass to put gravity to work and so larger and larger objects in space emerged over eons of time.

The point is this: while in no way was Peter speaking to us in scientific terms, and when he spoke of the elements he was only thinking in terms of wind, earth, fire and water (which, scientifically speaking are NOT elements at all) he had learned about the general process of the ending of the Universe and re-creation of a new one and passed it on to his readers. It would involve intense heat, melting what exists into basic elements, and then using those elements in a reforming of the earth and the Universe. Yet as we will see in Revelation 21 and 22, the new creation bears striking differences from the original creation.

There remains one more issue I'd like to approach; the issue of the freedom of the Creation to have choices and even itself to create. A hotly debated theological issue is this: does God's creation have a certain level of freedom divinely built into it such that while God actively oversees it all, directs and guides all to His intended goals, can Creation move forward and itself create? I'm not at all implying Darwinian evolution. Rather it is that God made a very particular kind of creation that expresses His glory and His love; and love for His creation includes certain freedoms He gave it. I'll give you an obvious example of that freedom, which is inherent to humanity: God has given us the freedom of choice. This choice presents itself in two segments of our lives: preference and morality. Within the segment of preference we find such choices as the kind of ice cream we like, our favorite color, where we want to live, the job or career we choose, and so on. Within the segment of morality it boils down to God giving us the freedom to choose to love Him or not; to choose to trust and obey Him or not. But is it only humans that have such freedom? Can created animals have a level of freedom? They don't have moral choices before them, but I've had enough pets to know that animals definitely have preferences. How about plants? Do created plants have freedom? Plant biologists are aware that plants can spontaneously evolve and develop their own insect resistance, or develop a tolerance for cold or heat or drought. It's not that plants have human-like intelligence and make conscious decisions, or that they self-evolve in such a way completely independent from God's purpose for them. Rather it is that the Creator has created them in such a way as to do exactly what they're doing to achieve God's will and, it seems, God has put some boundaries to how far they may extend that freedom. For instance, a plant is not allowed by God to eventually develop a brain or arms and legs. And yet, God's Creation that was not created on its own also cannot sustain itself on its own; it can only continue to exist by God's power and His love for it.

^{CJB} Colossians 1:14-17 ¹⁴ *It is through his Son that we have redemption- that is, our sins have been forgiven. ¹⁵ He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is supreme over all creation, ¹⁶ because in connection with him were created all things- in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, lordships, rulers or authorities- they have all been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He existed before all things, and he holds everything together.*

So it is my belief that God created His Creation with sufficient freedom to itself create in a measured way defined by Him. To be clear: it is not the same type of "creation" that God did, who created everything from nothing. God's creation is finite unlike Himself who is infinite. And it is God who ordered Creation and gave everything its purpose and function. So God's Creation does not have the freedom to change itself into something entirely different; something that God has not created it for. A spider can't become a Lion. A tree can't become a fish. Soil can't become water. But tectonic plates can move, cause earthquakes, and reshape continents. Sea levels can rise and fall changing coastal geography. Mountains can erupt and erode. Rivers can change course. Rich savannas can become barren deserts. Stars can explode sending their material into the vastness of space so that new cosmic bodies are formed. God has seen fit NOT to create a static heavens and earth that never changes, but rather one that constantly changes even producing new things from time to time. It is His will that it do so.

But how about the **new** heavens and earth of Revelation 21? Will it, too, have this same built-in freedom or will it be in a permanently static state because it has been perfected (and what can be achieved beyond perfection)? We'll eventually address that question but one major thing will change upon the new heaven and earth and it is this: the Torah will be no more. As of the re-creation of the new heaven and earth, the Law of Moses is abruptly abolished. Christ directly promised both that the Torah would remain in place and enforce until the new heaven and earth arrived.... and upon that event, end.

CJB Matthew 5:17-18 ¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.

¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.

The conditions of the earth and the Universe are going to be so radically different that in the Lord's determination even having the Law of Moses will no longer be appropriate. Remember: the main purpose for the Torah is to reveal God's holiness and sovereignty, and to set down rules of behavior for His worshippers and a justice system to deal with violators. Further it sets up a system for atoning for bad behavior (sin) and thus returning to peace with God (redemption). But perhaps the reason it will no longer be needed is because humanity will no longer sin. How is that possible? On the surface it is because Satan has been permanently placed into the Lake of Fire and because the new heaven and earth are now as fresh and uncorrupted as they were before Satan deceived Adam and Eve to disobey God. And yet Revelation chapter 20 taught us that even though Satan was locked away from influencing humanity for 1000 years, evil still lurked in the hearts and minds of many who lived during the Millennium, and in Christ's presence no less! It may well be that humankind (in whatever form we will exist when the new heaven and earth arrive) will have no evil inclination to lead us astray. Thus we will not make bad moral choices (sin) because there's none to make; not only will the Law be gone but so will our ability to be disobedient.

The implication of this is enormous. I have taught you before that one of the underlying governing dynamics of the Universe is that it is a Universe of opposites. If there is light, there is

darkness; if there is up there is down. If there is far there is near. If there is positive there is negative. If there is life there is death. If there is good there is evil. As we look at what Revelation 21 and 22 has to say about the new heaven and earth could it be that the re-creation will no longer be one of opposites? However if there are no opposites, does that not eliminate or at least greatly limit the very notion of choice? Could it be that the new creation (or the re-creation) of heaven and earth will be missing the built in freedom that God gave to His original creation? Does that mean that His new creation has no ability to itself create and thus although the new heaven and earth will be an eternal peaceful paradise.....it will be an entirely unchanging one?

We'll begin to address that and more next week.