

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS OUR DESTINATION

“Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who have been blessed by my Father! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34).

Is heaven really our home?

It’s unbelievable, but most Christians don’t have an accurate idea about where they are going. They don’t have clarity about what the Bible teaches as their destination. Some Bible translations give the wrong impression, especially those that we call paraphrases. It is not good to be too literal when translating the Bible, but on the other end of the spectrum, we have the paraphrased versions, for example, The Message or The Living Bible, in which the interpretation is overly influenced by modern culture. The result is like a film made about a former era, but it all looks very 21st century. There is one clear destination for the redeemed, and that is ‘to be with the Lord’.

Where are we going?

Common Christian terminology would have it that when we die, we go to heaven, and that’s it. When reading the Living Bible, I noticed several references to heaven which seemed unnatural (Heb 10:34, 11:10, 14). On looking up the Greek I found no heaven mentioned, rather it spoke of a city or country that the faithful were looking forward to.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, he told the criminal who expressed faith in him that he would be with him in paradise that very day (Lk 23:43). Paradise is mentioned three times in the New Testament. In 2 Cor 12:2, 4 Paul said he was caught up to the third

heaven, which in verse four he defined as paradise. In Rev 2:7 Jesus made a promise to everyone who conquers that he would give him the right to eat from the tree of life that is in God's paradise.

When Christians die, they go to be with the Lord. In Phil 1:23, Paul said he couldn't decide between two possibilities; to continue living and serve God here, or to depart and be with Christ which is far better. He also said that if the earthly tent we live in is torn down, we have a building in heaven that comes from God, an eternal house not built by human hands (2 Cor 5:1). Many interpret this as referring to the resurrection body that we will receive at Jesus' return. Others feel that, as the text says we already have this building from God, it refers not to the resurrection body, but to the home of the redeemed in heaven. Jesus said that his Father's house had many rooms and he was going to prepare a place for his disciples (Jn 14:2). Paul said that as part of our salvation in Christ, we have been raised up with him and seated with him in heaven (Eph 2:6). He also said that the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother (Gal 4:26). The book of Hebrews has a lot to say about this city. God has prepared a city for people of faith (11:16). Christians have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), so they are looking for the city that is to come (13:14). Then in Revelation John sees this city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It is a glorious place, and John sees it coming down from heaven to earth.

We can conclude from these verses that the holy city is the eternal home that God has prepared for us. Our spirits enter it at death so that we are not left wandering around naked in space. The resurrection body doesn't come until later when Jesus returns.

The intermediary state - 'heaven'

The 'intermediate state' is not a biblical term, but it refers to the spiritual state of believers between death and the Messiah's return to earth. The bodies of dead Christians decay in the grave or are burnt up by cremation. They exist as human spirits or souls only. Paul says that he would prefer to be absent from the body and home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). It is a temporary stopover, not the final state of bliss

and glorification. The martyrs John saw in Rev 6:9-11 were there as disembodied spirits or souls. They ask how long it will be before God judges the wicked who remain on the earth. They are looking forward to something there, but they are told to wait until the number of their brothers is complete. John sees them again in Rev 20:4, where they are now resurrected and will reign with the Messiah for 1000 years. Their glorification is finally complete.

Regarding heaven as the final destination of the righteous is unfortunate because it doesn't give scope to the imagination as the millennium does. The Christian hope, according to Paul, is our adoption as sons; the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23), which will materialize at the coming of the Messiah. Our hope should always be in the resurrection, the wedding supper of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem coming down to earth, and a future on earth during the messianic reign.

Jesus said that as he was going away to prepare a place for us, he would *come back to get us* so that we might be with him. It is a mistake to think that Jesus is coming back to earth for a momentary visit. If Christians go to be with the Lord at death, why does Jesus need to come back to earth to get us? Why couldn't the resurrection take place in heaven? Is there anything left in the grave that will form part of a resurrected person? The resurrection body is spiritual, but as Jesus showed us, he could appear on earth with a flesh and bone body (Lk 24:39). God has planned for us to have new bodies through resurrection because man is not complete without a body. Resurrection will make him whole again. The inhabitants of heaven don't need bodies, bodies are designed for living on earth. That is why, when Jesus returns, he will give us our resurrection bodies, so that we can live on a renewed earth, and God will make his home among men and dwell with them on the renewed earth (Rev 21:3).

Our earthly tent is temporary; the building from God is permanent. In the Father's house, a city, there are many places that Jesus has prepared for us. But what is it really? The jewels and pearls and streets of gold are symbolic, as are the tree of life and the river of life. They are symbolic of the glory and immortality we will enjoy, but our actual mode of existence at that time has not been revealed. No mind is able to conceive what God has prepared for those who love him.

The Great Tribulation – the final week

The first three and a half years of this horrendous ‘week’ are described by the first four seals, trumpets, and bowls. One-quarter of the world’s population will be killed during this time of warfare, famine, and most probably, radioactive contamination. This is the time when the final world empire will rule the world as a coalition of nations. It will devour the whole world, trampling it down and crushing it (Dan 7:23). The smoke and nuclear contamination resulting from these wars will cause much devastation and suffering. The Antichrist will emerge as a powerful dictator after putting down three other world leaders. He will make a peace accord with many nations for seven years, but then in the middle of that time, he will break it. C. F. Keil in his commentary on Daniel interprets this as: That ungodly prince shall impose on the mass of the people a strong covenant that they should follow him and give themselves to him as their God.

In the second half of the seven-year tribulation, with the help of his public affairs officer, the false prophet, he will set himself up as God, the only person to be worshipped. Through a campaign of blasphemy, political injustice, social harassment, economic deprivation and murder, he will put an end to all organized religion, including Christianity and Judaism. He will oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and object of worship. He will sit down in the sanctuary of God and declare that he is God (2 Thess 2:4). But there will be political opposition. His empire is described as a mixture of iron and clay, a metaphor for instability. The ‘king of the South’ (possibly a Muslim coalition) will engage him and the ‘king of the North’ will storm out against him. The Antichrist will invade many countries including Israel, then reports from the east and the north (beyond the Euphrates) will alarm him. He will finally come to his end at Jerusalem at the coming of the Messiah. Together with the false prophet, he will be captured and consigned directly to hell. The fifth and sixth trumpets and bowls relate to this period. The locusts and horses that they describe are symbolic of modern warfare – bombs and missiles and tanks. The number of troops involved in the final battle of Armageddon is stated to be 200 million, and a further one third of mankind is killed.

The church during the Great Tribulation

Some people claim that the church is not mentioned on earth during the Great Tribulation, thus supporting their theory that the rapture of the saints occurs before the tribulation begins. It is surely important for Christians to think about future events and to find out what to expect, whether we are going to experience the horrific years of the Great Tribulation or not. I believe one of the main reasons why God gave us the book of Revelation was to prepare the church for this time of persecution and martyrdom that will occur during these seven years. It was specifically written to God's servants *in the churches*, to show them what must surely take place (Rev 1:1). Whenever we see the word 'saints' (12 times), or 'servants of God' (10), or 'those who hold to the testimony of Jesus' (9), it is Christians who are in focus. Many verses speak of Christians being persecuted and martyred throughout the Great Tribulation and their need for endurance (Rev 1:9, 6:9-11, 7:3, 12:17, 13:7-10, 14:12, 16:6, 17:6, 18:20, 24, 20:4). The presence of Christians during this time is evidence that the resurrection of the righteous and the rapture of the living will not occur until the day of Jesus' return.

Daniel makes several clear statements about the distant future (Dan 8:26). He was told that the Antichrist would speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Most High. They'll be given into his control for three and a half years (7:25), destroying mighty men and the holy people (8:24). However, after the three and a half years, when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things will conclude (12:7).

Paul seems to have this text in mind when he tells the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord will not come unless the rebellion takes place first and the man of sin (the Antichrist), who is destined for destruction, is revealed (2 Thess 2:3). The Antichrist will be an atheist who honors military might. He'll plunge the world into a war so horrific that a third of the world's population will be slain (Rev 9:18). The rebellion from the east and the north can be identified with the 200 million strong army released at the Euphrates (Rev 9:13-16) and culminating in Armageddon at the Lord's return, when the Antichrist will come to his end. There will be continuous war during his reign, but when the Messiah comes, he will be killed by a word from his mouth.

No mention is made of people becoming believers during the tribulation, but that doesn't mean it won't occur. With that in mind let us look at twenty passages that indicate that the church will pass through the Great Tribulation. Some of these verses refer to Christian martyrs whose souls are in heaven, but they are all evidence of the presence of the church on earth during the Great Tribulation.

Rev 6:9 When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw under the altar the souls of *those who had been slain because of the word of God and the witness they had borne.*

The inference is that the martyrs had died following the opening of the first four seals.

6:11 Each of them was given a white robe. They were told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers was completed, who would be killed as they had been.

7:3 Don't harm the land, the sea, or the trees until we have marked *the servants of our God* with a seal on their foreheads.

The phrase 'servants of God' in Revelation (1:1, 2:20, 6:11, 7:3, 10:7, 11:18, 19:2, 5, 22:3, 6) always refers to Christians.

The 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel are on earth and at first sight would appear to be literal Israel, but it is a symbolic number ($12^2 \times 1000$) for the totality of the church, the Israel of God (Gal 3:29, 6:16). Those who belong to Christ are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

7:9, 14 John saw a crowd so large that no one was able to count it! They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing in front of the throne and the Lamb. These are the people who are coming out of the great tribulation. *They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

This innumerable number of saints are from every nation. They are before God's throne in heaven and appear to have died as Christian martyrs during the Great Tribulation.

8:3 An angel was given a large quantity of incense to offer on the gold altar before the throne, along with the prayers of all *the saints.*

These prayers are prayed by the suffering saints on earth (cf. 5:8) and the martyrs, asking how long it will be before God judges and takes revenge on those living on earth who shed their blood (6:10).

9:4 The locusts could harm only the people who *do not have the seal* of God on their foreheads.

That is the faithful, those who were sealed in chapter 7.

11:8 Their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where *their Lord* was crucified.

The two witnesses are Messianic Christians – Jewish believers, of whom there were an estimated 350,000 adherents in the world in 2012 (Wikipedia).

11:13 One-tenth of Jerusalem collapsed, 7,000 people were killed by the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and *gave glory to the God of heaven*.

Giving glory to God suggests repentance. Their response contrasts with that of the unrepentant unbelievers who curse God (16:9, 11, 21). However, their conversion awaits the Messiah's arrival, when he pours out his Spirit on them (Zech 12:10).

12:17 The dragon became angry with the woman (Israel) and went away to do battle against the rest of her children, the *ones who keep God's commandments and hold on to the testimony about Jesus*.

13:7 The Antichrist was allowed to wage war against *the saints* and to conquer them.

13:10 If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. Here is a call for endurance and faithfulness on the part of *the saints*.

Compare Jer 15:2. God's people get caught up in God's judgments. The antichrist was given power to make war against the saints, but the age will soon come to an end when the saints will be resurrected. So, they are encouraged to be faithful and endure, and not submit to the Antichrist.

14:1 John saw the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! With him were 144,000 people *who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*

Mount Zion is here equivalent to the New Jerusalem. The church sings a new song that nobody can learn except those who have been redeemed from the earth. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

14:12-13 This is a call for the endurance of *the saints who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to their faithfulness in Jesus.* A voice from heaven said, how blessed are the dead who die *in the Lord* from now on!

This is another plea to the church to endure. The severity of the persecution under the Antichrist is described in Rev 13. The blessing is pronounced upon those who are about to suffer martyrdom. They should not fear, because they will be blessed for surrendering their lives to the Lord.

14:16 The one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was harvested.

This picture of a grain harvest is the closest we get in Revelation to a description of the resurrection and rapture of the church. Cf. Mt 24:30-31. In Mk 4:29 harvesting the grain with a sickle is a picture of the ingathering of the righteous.

15:2 John saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire. Those who had conquered the beast, its image, and the number of its name (the church) were standing on the sea of glass holding God's harps in their hands.

16:6 God gave those who worshiped the Antichrist blood to drink as they deserved because they spilled the blood of *saints and prophets.*

16:15 Jesus said he was coming like a thief. How blessed is the person who remains alert, and keeps his clothes on (spiritual diligence). He won't have to go naked and let others see his shame.

17:6 John saw that the woman Babylon was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of *the witnesses to Jesus.*

18:20 Be happy about her (Babylon) heaven, *saints*, apostles, and prophets, for God has condemned her for you.

God has judged Babylon for the way she treated the church.

18:24 The blood of the world's prophets, *saints*, and all who had been murdered was found in her.

The woman who is guilty of the murder of all the Christians is defined as the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. It applies primarily to Antichrist's capital city, but it involves all the great cities of Antichrist's empire that are bound together by politics, commerce, and entertainment.

20:4 John saw the souls of *those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God*. They came back to life and ruled with the Messiah for a thousand years.

This is the first resurrection, the resurrection of the righteous, and presumably the resurrection of the entire church.

Two resurrections

The Nicene Creed (revised version 381) says:

“He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. ... we look for the *resurrection of the dead*, and the life of the *world to come*. Amen”

When we harmonize the biblical teaching, we find that there are two resurrections, one of the righteous and one of the wicked. The righteous are resurrected at the beginning of the messianic reign, while the wicked are resurrected and judged at the end of it. Jesus said *those who are considered worthy* of a place in that age and in *the resurrection* neither marry nor are given in marriage. And since they share in the resurrection, they are God's children (Lk 20:35-36). ‘That age’ and references to ‘the coming age’ (Mt 12:32, Mk 10:30, Lk 18:30, Eph 1:21, 2:7) are interpreted by the BAG Greek Lexicon as the messianic age. References to the first resurrection are numerous,

and in the following verses those resurrected are designated as the elect, the righteous, and those who are worthy (Mt 24:30-31, Lk 14:14, Jn 5:29, 11:25, 1 Cor 15:22-23, 2 Cor 4:14, Phil 3:20-21, 1 Thess 4:15-17, Rev 20:4-6). Jesus was the first person to be resurrected. Lazarus was brought back to life, but strictly speaking, not resurrected, because he died again, and resurrected people are immortal. The holy people who came to life when Jesus died (Mt 27:52-53) also later died. They were not resurrected with immortal bodies. Rev 20:4b-5 makes it very clear that there are two resurrections: “They came to life and reigned with Christ 1000 years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the 1000 years were ended.) This is the first resurrection” (NIV).

The rapture

The living saints will be raptured to meet the Lord in the air at the second coming. It is not done secretly; it will be a very loud and brilliant display of power and glory. There will be a loud roar like a waterfall (Ezek 43:2, Rev 1:15), and the sound of a loud trumpet (1 Thess 4:15). The angels will gather the elect from one end of the earth to another. It will happen very quickly; it is not a drawn-out affair. The dead in Christ will be raised first, and then the living saints will be changed (1 Cor 15:52).

Christians are not left in darkness so that the Day of the Lord will surprise them like a thief (1 Thess 5:4). They will be watching for the signs and will be ready for whatever eventuates. They won't be confused about it. They will know that the coming of the Lord and their being gathered to him *will not happen unless the rebellion takes place first and the Antichrist is revealed* (2 Thess 2:1-3). He will oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god and object of worship and will set himself up in the Jewish temple (Mt 24:15, 2 Thess 2:4) proclaiming himself to be God. The phrase ‘temple of God’ is found in Mt 26:61, where false witnesses accused Jesus of saying he could destroy it and rebuild it in three days. Again, in Rev 11:1-2 John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God and those who worship there, but not to measure the court outside the temple. These verses confirm that a third temple will be built in Jerusalem in the last days.

The second coming is not imminent, because the rebellion hasn't happened yet. Antichrist will appear on the scene at least seven years before Christ returns, and he'll set himself up in the temple three and half years before he returns. So, the church should be on the lookout for the rise of the Antichrist and his worldwide empire. But her *hope* is in the second coming of Christ and the resurrection and the millennial reign on earth. Nobody knows the day when the Messiah will return, but Paul says that he will not return before the rebellion of humanity against God occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess 2:3). God has not left his people in the dark about this. His coming will not surprise them like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:4). This teaching leaves no room for a secret rapture.

There is no clear teaching about people being saved after the resurrection and rapture. Only one resurrection of the righteous is mentioned. In the parable of the virgins, the time came when the door was shut. Paul makes it clear that there is a certain date when the full number of Christians is complete, and that is when the Lord Jesus returns. After that moment, the door is closed to the monarchy; the full number of the Gentiles will have come in. No others will be able to reign with Christ during his reign on earth.

But Israel will be saved after the Lord's arrival. Stubbornness has come to *part of Israel* until the *full number* of the Gentiles has come to faith, then *all Israel* will be saved as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion, he will turn godlessness away from Jacob' (Rom 11:25-26). When the Spirit is poured out on all Israel, they will be saved, but too late to be included in the resurrection, and too late to be a part of the monarchy. Their role in the kingdom is a different one.

1. Church age until the age of grace finishes
2. Jesus returns and the church is resurrected and raptured
3. Israel is saved and reinstated as God's people on earth
4. The church rules the world with the Messiah

In the parable of the talents, Jesus taught that the kingship would be taken away from the Jews and given to a people producing its fruits (Mt 21:43). Israel would still to be saved, but they would miss out on the kingship. They will be saved when the Messiah, at his return, comes *to Zion* to save Israel from its enemies (Isa 52:8-10). Then Paul says, he will come *from Zion* (Rom 11:26) and banish ungodliness

from Jacob. When Jesus pardons Israel for its sin of unbelief in him, he will renew his covenant with them, a prerequisite for them being renewed as God's people among the nations.

Christians won't suffer God's wrath

We are called to suffer for Christ (Acts 14:22, Phil 1:29), but not to suffer God's wrath. God's seal on the foreheads of believers (Rev 7:3) doesn't guarantee protection from persecution or martyrdom, it is God's stamp of ownership guaranteeing their eternal security. Death will be transient because death has been conquered. Christians are not appointed to suffer wrath, but to experience salvation. Jesus will rescue them from the coming wrath, but the church will have to pass through the Great Tribulation. Jesus' prayer for his disciples is not that God would take them out of the world (as in a pretribulation rapture) but that he would protect them from the evil one (Jn 17:15). There are thousands of Christian martyrs every year. They lose their lives for Christ, but they gain eternal life. They don't suffer God's wrath. There is no condemnation or punishment for those who are in Christ Jesus. The seal was put on God's servants so that they would not be affected by the calamities that followed the opening of the seals. Then, after the fifth trumpet, the locusts were told not to harm those who had the seal of God (Rev 9:4). And after the first bowl was poured out, painful sores broke out *only* on people who had the mark of the beast (Rev 16:2).

The millennium

The New Testament gives little detail about the Messiah's reign, but Revelation 20 repeats six times that it will last 1000 years and makes it clear that the righteous will reign with Christ during that time. 1000 years may be symbolic for a long time, but that doesn't mean it is not literal. Rev 21:1-22:5 is often regarded as a description of the new heavens and the new earth, but on closer scrutiny, we find that only the first verse relates to the new earth. John saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. That is all that he says about the earth.

The rest of the passage is about the New Jerusalem which descends from heaven and is the abode of God and the redeemed. The holy city is a place, but it may not be in this place-time dimension. It is a very symbolic representation of the community of the redeemed. Consequently, there is little said about contact with the surrounding nations and the world, but there is enough to indicate that the New Jerusalem relates to the millennial era and corresponds in some way to the earthly Jerusalem. It is a picture of the saint's glorification, beginning from the time of the resurrection, and the marriage feast of the Lamb which celebrates their union with him.

The new heavens and earth that John saw in Rev 21:1 is a vision of the world during the millennium. It is the new heavens and earth that Isaiah saw (Isa 65:17-25). It is the age of renewal of all things that Jesus spoke about, the liberation of the creation from its bondage to decay that Paul spoke about (Rom 8:21). The old order will pass away under Messiah's rule. The sea is often a metaphor for the tumult and rebellion of the nations, in which case 'no more sea' would reflect the peace and righteousness that the nations will experience under the Messiah's firm rule. Psalm 72 is a messianic psalm that anticipates a worldwide rule. All the kings of the earth will serve the Messiah as he rules *from sea to sea* (Zech 9:10).

The earth and heavens finally flee from God's presence at the white throne judgment (Rev 20:11), when they have finally served their purpose. The unrighteous dead will be judged according to what they have done and then consigned to hell together with death and Hades. Only what is immortal will remain.

Rev 21:2 – 22:5 describes John's vision of the New Jerusalem whose inhabitants are the immortal bride of Christ. This is our eternal home. The New Jerusalem should be identified with the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22), which is the abode of the departed saints after death and before resurrection, but which now comes down out of heaven. Earth is not mentioned as the destination of this city or community, but it must relate to the earth in some way because the city has descended from heaven and God's dwelling place is now with man. Heaven has come down to earth! This is reminiscent of Gen 3:8 where Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

The purpose of this vision is to portray in symbolic form the glorification of the saints in their relationship to the Messiah and God during the messianic reign and on into eternity. It is the climax of the book and is fittingly left to the end before concluding remarks are made by Jesus and John. The descent of the holy city (Rev 21:2, 9-10) seems to be another way of describing the resurrection of the righteous. Before the descent, the spirits of the righteous are in the holy city in heaven. After the descent, the resurrected saints are in the holy city which is near the earth. After the saints are resurrected at the Messiah's return, there follows the wedding of the Lamb (19:6-7), after which believers are eternally united to God.

The Old Testament prophecies give us many more details about the earthly messianic reign. The Messiah will rule from Mount Zion with the saints (Dan 7:27), there will be houses, vi gardens (Isa 65:21-22), and the Messiah will rule over the unbelieving survivors of the nations (Zech 14:16). He will rule them with justice and righteousness resulting in worldwide peace (Is 2:4). The earth will be gradually regenerated with an ideal climate free of drought or storm. The curse will be removed and nature will be in harmony with man, with no more thistles and thorns and no more danger from animals, reptiles, insects, bacteria, or viruses (Isa 11:6-9). Man will live progressively longer on earth as disease is eradicated (Isa 65:20).

When the righteous dead are resurrected, and the righteous living are raptured at the Messiah's return, they, in their new bodies, will reign over the earth with the Messiah (Dan 7:18, 22, Rev 20). Although John saw only those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus, these martyrs represent all the righteous, who come back to life in what is termed, 'the first resurrection'. That is the straightforward interpretation of Rev 20. They will feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the royal family. The nations, who are the subjects of the kingdom, will bring tribute to Jerusalem, and serve God's people, but they won't enter the city (Isa 60, Rev 21:26-27).

The resurrection body is spiritual, supernatural, imperishable, glorious, powerful, and bearing the likeness of the man from heaven (1 Cor 15:42-44). There is not much more we can say about those resurrection bodies, except what Paul said in 1 Cor 15. But we shouldn't think of the resurrection body as being unsuitable for life on

earth. Jesus appeared to people over a 40-day period in his resurrection body, before ascending to the Father's throne. They touched him, and he breathed and talked and ate with them. Jesus was recognizable by those who knew him, but at times he went unrecognized, which was something that he could control (Mt 28:17, Lk 24:15, 31, Jn 20:15-16, 21:4, 7, 12). Gordon Fee in his commentary on 1 Corinthians suggests that when the resurrected body is called 'spiritual' (1 Cor 15:44), it is not in the sense of 'immaterial', but of 'supernatural'.

The resurrected Jesus was supernatural in the sense that he could walk through walls, and disappear into a different realm. That may be what we can expect of our resurrection bodies because we will be like him. We are only given a symbolic representation of our home, the New Jerusalem; our mode of existence has not been revealed. The description of our future home, the New Jerusalem, is symbolic because it represents an existence in a different realm. The New Jerusalem is distinct from, but closely related to, the earthly Jerusalem. Paul spoke of the present city of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem that is above, who is our mother (Gal 4:25-26).

The messianic promises of the Old Testament are not situated on a newly created earth, or in heaven, but on this present earth (Ps 2:6, 8, 110:2, Isa 35:1-10, 49:8-23, 51:4-6, Dan 7:14, Mic 4:1-8, Zech 8:2-8). See also the following New Testament references:

Mt 19:28 Jesus told his disciples that when he sits on his glorious throne in the *renewed creation*, they would sit on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Acts 3:21 The Messiah must remain in heaven until *the time of universal restitution, which God promised long ago through his prophets*.

Rom 8:19-21 The creation eagerly awaits the revelation of God's children, because it has been subjected to futility. One day it will *be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of God's children*.

2 Pet 3:12-13 We are *waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God*, when the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire. But in keeping

with his promise, we are looking forward to *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*.

Peter is not asking the faithful to look forward and hasten the end of the world. He uses the Greek word ‘παρουσία’ which he also used in 2 Pet 1:16, 3:4, where it refers to the coming of the Lord. The promise he refers to of a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells alludes to the prophecy in Isa 65:17ff, which is about a new order of things on earth under the Messiah. The former things will not be remembered or even come to mind. The glorious Jerusalem described in Isa 62 is also millennial. The prophets knew nothing of a new planet, only a renewed earth. Isaiah describes a glorious Jerusalem (Isa 62:4) with a new name ‘Hephzibah’ (My Delight is in Her). He tells the faithful to give the Lord no rest, until he makes Jerusalem a song of praise throughout the earth (Isa 62:7). Israel is there, and all who are called ‘the Holy People’ and ‘The redeemed of the Lord’ (Isa 62:12).

Eternal life is kingdom life

Life in the Kingdom of God can be equated with eternal life, or simply life, as John refers to it. The eternal life for which we hope and expect will initially be worked out on this earth in the Messiah’s kingdom.

Matthew records Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats where kingdom life is equated with eternal life. After the king tells those on his right to come and *inherit the kingdom* (Mt 25:34), he says, those people will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into *eternal life* (Mt 24:46).

John’s Gospel only mentions the Kingdom of God twice, when Jesus talks with Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again. But John makes up for this by referring 17 times to ‘eternal life’ and 19 times to ‘life’. What is eternal life if it is not life in the Kingdom from God? Living as a king and co-heir with Jesus will be exciting and glorious, but this life is also defined as knowing the Father and the one he sent, Jesus the Messiah. Eternal life is knowing God, being united to God through Christ in a relationship akin to marriage, and reigning with him on into eternity. Believers have already crossed over from death to life (Jn 5:24).

The kingdom is also equated with life in Mk 9:43-47. Jesus said that it is better to lose a hand or foot or eye than to be thrown into hell. Better to 'enter life' maimed, he said twice, but the third time he said, 'better to enter the Kingdom of God', thus equating 'life' with 'the Kingdom of God'. The kingdom is also contrasted with hell, which is literally Gehenna, Jerusalem's burning rubbish heap in the valley of Hinnon. It is interesting that the two eternal destinies, heaven and hell, are pictured as a new Jerusalem (Isa 65:18-19) and Gehenna (Isa 66:24, Mk 9:47) on the outskirts. John maintains the picture in Rev 22:15, saying that *outside* are dogs, sorcerers, immoral people, murderers, idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. The Jerusalem of Isaiah 60 is the Israelite capital of a regenerated earth; that of John is heavenly in origin and is the dwelling of God and the church.

After the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told his disciples that it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:25). By talking about 'life' rather than the kingdom, John concentrates his teaching on the spiritual life we already have, rather than focusing on the future. John's Gospel was written later than the Synoptic Gospels and he wrote predominantly to a Gentile audience. He mentions 'the Jews' 70 times, referring especially to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time. Kingdom terminology was not so relevant to the Gentiles as it had been for the Jews that Jesus ministered to. Even now, talking about 'eternal life' is more relevant to most people than talking about 'the Kingdom of God'.

John's final book, Revelation, is all about the final showdown, the events that will happen before and after Jesus' return, leading into the earthly kingdom. The central verse is Rev 11:15 where the world's kingdom becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of his Messiah, who then reigns forever and ever.

The time for Jesus' return is drawing nearer with the return of Israel to their historical land, and with globalization and world government on the increase. The scene is now set for the rise of the Antichrist, the day of judgment at Armageddon, the salvation of Israel, and the millennium. As the end approaches, kingdom terminology will become more relevant and precious to God's people.

The New Jerusalem

I was going to entitle this section ‘the eternal state’, but New Jerusalem is the biblical term that expresses this idea. When the Messiah’s reign on earth comes to an end, he will hand the kingship over to God the Father. In doing so, the Son himself becomes subject to the Father so that the Father may be all in all. Jesus will be the undisputed king over the earth during the millennium, the King of kings and Lord of lords, but when this earth disappears and all unbelievers are judged, the throne of God and the Lamb will remain in the New Jerusalem.

When John saw his vision of the last judgment, he made a clear statement about the created universe. He said the earth and the heavens fled from God’s presence, and no place was found for them (Rev 20:11). After the judgment, Death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire, and anyone whose name was not found in the book of life will be consigned to that same fate. That is the end of the world and the whole created universe.

Scholars such as R. H. Charles, Theodore Zahn, and G. R. Beasley-Murray interpret the vision of the New Jerusalem as millennial rather than the eternal state, but this relationship between God and his people is eternal, starting with the resurrection, when the saints enter eternity, and continuing forever (Rev 22:3-4), so it is portrayed as both millennial and eternal.

Rev 21:24 speaks of *the nations* walking by the light of the glory of God which shines from the New Jerusalem. Then John says that the gates are always open and the kings of the earth bring their splendor into it (Rev 21:25-26). This fulfills the Isaiah 60 prophecy, which describes the glorification of the earthly Jerusalem and its temple as the nations bring their wealth to it. Then in Rev 21:27, John reminds us that only those whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life can enter the New Jerusalem. Time and eternity, earth and heaven, come together in these verses. The saints will reign over the earth during the millennium from the New Jerusalem. The throne of God and the Lamb are there, but at the same time, the Messiah will be seated on the Davidic throne in the earthly Jerusalem (Ezek 43:6-7).

God himself dwells in the New Jerusalem, and Jesus is referred to seven times as ‘the Lamb’. The holy city is called ‘the wife of the

Lamb', and there is mention of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and the Lamb's book of life. Father and Son are linked together in three ways: The glory of God gives the city light and the Lamb is its lamp, while the throne of God and the Lamb is mentioned twice. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are there, but there is a temple in the earthly Jerusalem, where the unregenerate nations come to worship. The title 'Lamb' occurs in Revelation 28 times. Although the Greek word is diminutive in form, it no longer had this meaning in the first century. It may rather designate the leading ram, who leads his flock to victory. He is the shepherd (7:16), who will 'shepherd' the nations with an iron rod. The Lamb of Revelation is the glorified Christ, enthroned with God, and victorious over all opposing forces, whether human or demonic. In Rev 5, he is the Lamb who was slain, and several verses speak of the blood of the Lamb who purchased men for God from every tribe and nation.

New Jerusalem and earthly Jerusalem

1. At the Messiah's return the Mount of Olives splits in two and Jerusalem is raised higher than the surrounding mountains (Mic 4:1-2). Instruction proceeds from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem. The fountain that flows from the temple (Joel 3:18, Ezek 47:1-12, Zech 14:8) and the throne (Rev 22:1-2) is symbolic of physical and spiritual blessings (cf. 7:17, 21:6b, 22:17).
2. The New Jerusalem (the Holy City) symbolizes the union of the Messiah and his bride, the church; the union of God and his people. Once resurrected the church lives in that eternal community, whether during the millennium or after it. There is no temple there because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.
3. Promises made to the conquerors in the seven letters include having the name of New Jerusalem written on them, sitting with the Messiah on his earthly throne, and having authority over the nations.
4. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God. It is not a part of this creation, but is visible as a bright light

positioned over the earthly Jerusalem. The holy city consists of its inhabitants; God, angels and the resurrected righteous. For John to see it in his vision, he was carried away in the Spirit to a very high mountain (Rev 21:10-11).

5. The nations who survive the Great Tribulation go to the earthly Jerusalem to worship the Lord year after year.
6. Alluding to Isa 60:11 which describes the earthly Jerusalem, the gates are never shut, day or night, and the kings of the earth bring their splendor to it. They cannot enter the New Jerusalem which is only for the redeemed, and above the earth.
7. The redeemed have access to the Tree of Life (Rev 22:14) and are immortal. The leaves of the Tree of Life are for the healing of the nations on earth. They are ministered to by the redeemed, who are a kingdom of priests. Evildoers are spoken of as being outside the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:15), alluding to Gehenna, a symbol of hell.
8. The last eight chapters of Ezekiel are a vision of a renewed temple, a division of land for the prince, the priesthood, the Levites, and all the tribes of Israel. Jesus promised the twelve that they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel during the millennium. Israel will be God's people on earth supervising the temple worship.

The essence of eternal life in paradise

God is making everything new - no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor mind imagined, the things that God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).

Relationships - The triune God dwells eternally with his redeemed people. They are his people, sometimes called children, and he is their God. They live in the heavenly realm and see his face. There is no temple there because God is present. They serve him and reign with him.

Light and life - The river of the water of life is there to assuage every thirst. The tree of life is there to communicate life and to bear an abundance of fruit to give complete satisfaction. Leaves are symbolic

of health and well-being. There is no night there, and no sun and moon are needed, because God is light.

Bliss - There is no curse there or any effect of a curse. There is no death, the saints are immortal. There is no suffering; no tears or pain. There are no unbelievers or evildoers, and nothing impure, only those who are enrolled in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Glory - The city shines with the glory of God. The precious stones, gates of pearl, and streets of gold are all symbolic of the glory that awaits God's people. It is the glory of wealth, royalty, health, wholeness, purity, sufficiency, and happiness.

Kingship - He who overcomes inherits all this. The saints reign forever (22:5), an allusion to Dan 7:18 where the saints inherit the kingdom forever.

The creation and the new creation

What does the future hold? Scientists are rather pessimistic about the future of the universe and wonder what man can do to ensure our eventual survival. I doubt that they can do anything apart from taking care of the environment. The future has always been, and will always be, in God's hands. The choice for man is between heaven and hell. For those who choose to follow the Savior a glorious future has been promised. We live in a space-time dimension; this physical universe is all we know. But we read in the Bible about God, the Creator, who lives in another dimension called heaven. We can't see him, because we don't live in that dimension. But what of the future? We have the promise of a renewed sky and earth, and the New Jerusalem. How do these places relate to our present earth? What will living be like in those new domains? What can we say about the continuity or discontinuity of the human person and the creation with its geology and flora and fauna?

The Messianic kingdom will be a continuation of this present earth. The present world and its infrastructure will be totally devastated by warfare and earthquake during the Great Tribulation, but mankind and the creation will survive. The Messiah's government will be a theocracy, not the rule of God alone, but the rule of the Messiah and

his kingdom of priests. He will restore the world and stamp out all forms of evil. The present creation is in bondage to decay and degradation; everything dies and degenerates, the energy of the universe gradually moving towards disorder. Romans 8:21 says that the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. The curse will be lifted as the Messiah brings the earth back to an ideal condition. But what will this liberation lead to? The creation will not become immortal but will experience freedom from the bondage to decay. Godet, in his commentary on Romans (p. 315), says that this liberty expresses the unchecked development of the free expansion of all the powers of life, beauty, and perfection, wherewith this new nature will be endowed. There is no resurrection or immortality here; the individual in the animal or plant world is merely the temporary manifestation of the species.

The rebirth or regeneration of nature during the millennium should not be confused with the glorification of redeemed humanity. Their glorification begins with resurrection which is a transformation of the body resulting in immortality. It is the beginning of the process whereby redeemed humanity attain supernatural bodies, become heirs of Messiah's kingdom, are formally united to Christ, and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). They will reign with God forever. Animals and the rest of the creation are not included. The creation is doomed to annihilation as the scientists predict, but it will happen in God's perfect timing. Before it is annihilated, it will be perfectly restored over a period of 1000 years.

There are only two ultimate destinations for humanity; what is usually described as heaven and hell. There is also an intermediate state after death; for the believer it is called 'being present with the Lord', for the unbeliever it is Hades. At the resurrection, believers will rise to life in the New Jerusalem, and from there they will rule over the earth. After the millennium, believers will continue to reign with God, while unbelievers will be resurrected and condemned.

There are many questions about the millennium. Who will live on earth during the millennium? Are people born and do people die during the millennium? Is there opportunity for salvation during the

millennium? Are the glorified saints in their resurrected bodies mixed with mortals on earth during the millennium?

My position on these things has been clearly stated. The resurrected saints in their immortal bodies will be living in the New Jerusalem, not on Earth, nevertheless, they will rule the Earth. As the royal family, they are the ruling monarchy. They will no longer have children and will never die. The subjects of the kingdom are the survivors of the Great Tribulation, both Israel, who have been saved, and the nations, who are unbelievers. Jerusalem will be the world capital and the Messiah will be king over the whole earth. During the millennium there will be one Lord and his name will be the only name worthy of worship. There is no biblical evidence that the Messiah will be visible, apart from the light of the glory of God over Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem will be the center for worship and all nations will come there to bring gifts and pay homage to the king.

The saints will have bodies like Jesus' resurrected body and will appear on earth in their role as priests and rulers. We are not given details. The unbelievers will enjoy the ideal conditions on earth during those days, and presume there will be the opportunity to be saved, but the rebellion at the end of the 1000 years, when Satan is released from his prison, indicates that the majority will remain unregenerate. People will be buried when they die and resurrected at the last judgment. Believers will then join the elect in the New Jerusalem, while unbelievers are consigned to hell.

The Jewish generation that survives the Great Tribulation will be converted after Jesus' return, but they will not be raptured at this time. The Messiah will pour out his Spirit on them and they will be cleansed from sin and impurity (Zech 12:10, 13:1). They will enter the millennium as God's redeemed nation, Israel. In their previous unbelief, they forfeited the kingdom, but they will serve God as priests and Levites at the temple so that the nations can come and worship God acceptably. Believers who die will be resurrected at the last judgment and join the elect in the New Jerusalem.

In the New Jerusalem there is no death; all the inhabitants are immortal. The holy city is the home of God, the Messiah, angels and the redeemed. The latter will enter this state when they are resurrected at the Messiah's arrival, and they will live and reign with him forever.

They will reign over the earth during the millennium from the New Jerusalem. The city will be in a different space-time dimension and the saints will commute between the city and the earth in human form, just as Jesus did for 40 days after his resurrection, and just as angels have always done. It will correspond to the earthly Jerusalem and hover over it, so that the two, in a sense, become one. It is the holy city, because God is there. The ultimate Jewish king, the Messiah, and his throne are also there. Its gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel, and its foundation are named after Jesus' twelve apostles. The redeemed have their names written in the Lamb's book of life and constitute the royal family. During the millennium, the nations will see the light of Zion's glory (Isa 60:3, Rev 21:24) and they will bring their wealth to it, but it will be destined for the temple in the earthly Jerusalem, because nothing impure can enter the celestial city (Rev 21:27). This city is a place where there is no more death or crying or pain. God said he is making everything new (Rev 21:4-5), a space-time dimension that is not made of matter. What is said in Rev 21:2 – 22:5 does not describe the world during Messiah's reign, it describes the other-worldly New Jerusalem. Apart from its connection with Jerusalem as the city of God, the holy city shows no continuity with planet earth. The earth is temporary, the holy city is eternal. Jesus said the sky and earth will pass away, and Heb 12:26-28 teaches the removal of created things, things that can be shaken, so that only what cannot be shaken may remain.