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Life in the World to Come

How real will it be?

BY SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

WILL THE NEW WORLD BE A material place like the present one or a “spiritual” realm, radically different from this world? Will the redeemed engage in the kind of activities we know today, or will they spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and meditation? This article focuses on the actual environment and lifestyle of the redeemed.¹

The chief biblical passages that speak of life in the new earth (Isa. 65:17-25; 66:22-23; Rev. 21:1-22:5) offer us only glimpses of what life will really be like there. Thus any attempt to characterize the life, conditions, and pursuits of the world to come must be seen as very limited and imperfect efforts to describe a reality that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (1 Cor. 2:9).*

Renewal of This Earth

To appreciate the biblical glimpses about life in the world to come, it’s important to remember first of all that in the Bible the eternal habitation of the redeemed is located right here on this earth, and not somewhere up “in heaven.” Both the Old Testament and the New speak of a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1) as being not a different world somewhere off in space, but the present heaven and earth renewed and transformed to their original perfection.

The biblical vision of the world to come is inspired by the peace, harmony, material prosperity, and delight of the primordial Sabbath. Adam’s first day after his creation functions in the Old Testament as a paradigm of the last days, a common designation for the world to come. The

peace and harmony that existed between Adam and the animals at Creation will be restored in the new earth, when “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6).

Similarly, the prosperity and abundance that prevailed at Creation will be restored on the new earth, where “the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13; cf. Isa. 4:2; 30:23-25; Joel 3:18; Zeph. 3:13). These descriptions convey the picture of a real and abundant “earthly” life in the new world. “The wilderness becomes a fruitful field” (Isa. 32:15), and “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Isa. 11:6).

The New Testament presents essentially the same vision of the world to come. Peter speaks of this “earth and the works that are upon it” that will be purified by fire (2 Peter 3:10). The outcome will be “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (verse 13). Paul declares that the whole human and subhuman creation is eagerly longing to “be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19-21). John saw in vision “a new heaven and a new earth” that God will establish after purifying this present earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

Active Urban Life

Perhaps the most powerful image used in the New Testament to convey the sense of continuity between the present and the future world is the image of the Holy City.

Hebrews, for example, says that Abraham “looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). The experience of Abraham is typological for all believers, because, as the same author explains, “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

The New Testament closes with a most impressive description of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, into which are welcomed “only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27). It is doubtful that all the details of the city—the high walls, the 12 gates, the 12 foundations—are to be taken literally. Whatever their meaning might be, however, the vision of the Holy City conveys the image, not of a mystical, monastic life in a heavenly retreat, but of urban life of intense activity on this renewed earth.

Life in the Holy City will not be one of isolation and loneliness, but of communion, excitement, and action. The New Jerusalem will be a complex, cosmopolitan place where people of different races, cultures, and languages will live and work together in peace. Life will not be static and boring, but dynamic and creative.

“In the New Jerusalem,” Shirley C. Guthrie writes, “there will be community without uniformity, individuality without irresponsibility. The problem of individual rights versus community welfare will be solved in such a way

that community serves individual, and individual serves the community, in a commonwealth of free responsible beings united in love.”²

The image of the redeemed living together in the City of God in interrelatedness and interdependence represents the fulfillment of the divine intent for creation



and redemption. At Creation God willed that human beings would find their fulfillment, not by living alone, but in working together to subdue and have dominion over the earth. Through redemption Christ reconciles us to God and to fellow beings so that we can live in peace with all people.

Urban Life Sanctioned by God

The biblical vision of the Holy City in the new earth suggests that the structure of urban life is sanctioned by God. For many it is difficult to accept this view, because our present cities are hardly a reflection of the City of God. On the contrary, they are the places where crime, hate, hostility, and indifference toward God and fellow beings prevail.

The present state of urban life should not cause us to reject, in principle, urbanization as a sinful social structure. The fact that urban life will continue on the new earth tells us that it will be possible for people to live together in a complex urban system of interrelatedness and interdependence without giving rise to the social, economic, ecological, political, and racial problems we experience today.

Moreover, this vision of living together in the future City of God should challenge us as Christians not to abandon the cities en masse by fleeing to the country, but to work in and for the cities by offering our Christian influence and helping to solve the many complex problems.

Activity and Creativity

Life in the new earth will not be spent in idleness or passive meditation, but in productive activity and creativity. Those who think that the redeemed will live in the new world as glorified guests—fed, housed, and entertained by God—are totally misled. Isaiah writes: “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat” (Isa. 65:21, 22).

The biblical picture of tomorrow’s

world is one in which real people engage in productive activity and creativity. There will be no lack of time or resources to complete our projects. In the field of knowledge today we can only scratch the surface of any discipline in which we choose to specialize. The more we learn, the more we realize there is yet much to be learned.

In the new earth, however, there will be no limit to our growth in knowledge and grace. "Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body."³

Continuity With Present Culture

Life in the new earth will involve some continuity with what we may loosely term our present culture. This is suggested by the fact that God will purify this earth and resurrect our bodies, rather than creating a new planet with brand-new inhabitants.

Another significant indication of continuity is found in Revelation 21:24-26: "The kings of the earth shall

bring their glory into [the city] . . . ; they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." This passage suggests, first of all, that the inhabitants of the new earth will include persons who have attained great prominence and power in this world: kings, presidents, scientists, and the like.

Second, the unique contributions that individuals or nations have made to the betterment of the present life will not be lost. They will continue to enrich the life of the new earth. This gives us reason to believe that the technological breakthroughs of our time will not be lost, but greatly enhanced, refined, and perfected. The God who affirms the goodness of the world He has made and who values our creative accomplishments will not simply write off all the creative work that men and women have produced, often at great personal sacrifice. It is comforting to think that the value of our creative work will extend beyond this present life to the new earth.

The preservation of the unique accomplishments of humankind suggests that life in the new earth will not be dull and colorless, but exciting and fulfilling.

Absence of Evil and Fear

A most notable difference between our present life and that of the new

earth will be the absence of all the things that now limit or harm our lives. There will be no more manifestation of evil, either within us or around us. It is hard to imagine what it will be like to live in the new world without the presence of hate, jealousy, fear, hostility, discrimination, deception, oppression, killing, cutthroat competition, political rivalries, arms races, economic recessions, racial tensions, starvation, disparity between the rich and the poor, or sickness and death.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). These bold strokes suggest far more than they actually indicate.

They suggest that there will be no more incurable diseases, no more tragic accidents, no more crippled children, no more funeral services, no more permanent separations. They also suggest that we will be able to accomplish our God-inspired goals. In our present life, sickness or death often terminates the ambitious projects we are pursuing. In the new earth everyone will have unlimited time and resources to achieve the highest goals.

The absence of evil will be evident especially in the absence of fear, insecurity, and anxiety. Our present life is constantly exposed to dangers, uncertainties, and fears. We fear the loss of our job, the robbery of our home, the breakdown of our car, the unfaithfulness of our marital partner, the failure of our children at school or at work, the deterioration of our health, the rejection by our peers. In a word, we fear all the uncertainties of life. Such fears fill our lives with anxiety, thus contradicting God's purpose for us and diminishing our human potential.

Scripture uses various images to reassure us that on the new earth there will be no fear or insecurity. It speaks of a city with permanent foundations built by God Himself (Heb. 11:10), and of "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28).

The citizens of the new earth will

be responsible stewards of God's new creation. They will not spoil it again. A perfect ecological equilibrium will be preserved, which will guarantee the well-being of the human and subhuman creation.

The Presence of God

The most rewarding aspect of life on the new earth will be an unprecedented experience of the presence of God among His people. "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3). These familiar words are the central promise of God's covenant of grace (cf. Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10), which will be realized fully in the new earth.

God's presence in the new earth will be so real that "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). Believers will enjoy on the new earth the blessed fellowship that Adam and Eve experienced each Sabbath when God came to visit them. The Fall interrupted this blessed fellowship, but the Sabbath remained to remind believers of its future restoration (Heb. 4:9). Our weekly celebration of the Sabbath nourishes our hope of the future fellowship with God in the new earth. That will be, as Augustine puts it, "the greatest of Sabbaths," when "we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise; this is what will be at the end without end."⁴

This glorious biblical vision of the world to come can fire our imagination, nourish our hope, and strengthen our faith while we live among the uncertainties and troubles of this present life. It can inspire us "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (Titus 2:12) while we await the consummation of our blessed hope, the appearing of our Saviour to restore this world to its original perfection. ■

This material, shortened and slightly modified, is drawn from the author's new book, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study of Human Nature and Destiny* (published by Biblical Perspectives,

4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103).

* Bible texts in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

¹ A companion article last week looked at what people will be like in the world to come, concluding that the redeemed will have a physical body like the present one, but without the liabilities of sin, sickness, and death. (See the cover story in the Nov. 5 *Adventist Review*.)

² Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta: 1968), p. 398.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif., 1911), p. 677.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 22, 30. Ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: 1958), p. 544.

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