

Tales of the End: A Study of the Book of Revelation

Session 19: Revelation Interpretation History, Part 2; The Last Word on Heaven

Book: *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting The Book of Revelation* by Arthur Wainwright, 2001. *Breaking the Code* by Bruce Metzger. *Reversed Thunder* by Eugene Peterson

The New Futurism

- Premillennialists, all of whom expected Christ to return at the beginning of the millennium, also treated the book as a prediction of the course of history.
- Another variation of Futurism has become greatly popular in the twentieth century.
- It is known as **Dispensationalism**.
- **Dispensationalism** believes God's activity in history is divided into seven dispensations.
- Its champion was John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a clergyman of the Anglican Church of Ireland, who broke away to become one of the leaders of the Plymouth Brethren.
- Great emphasis was laid by Darby on the Jewish people's role in the divine plan.
- He argued that they were symbolized by the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and the woman of Revelation 12.
- His most distinctive teaching is about the **rapture** described in **I Thessalonians 4:17**.
- Christians who are still alive will be caught up into **heaven** to meet the Lord.
- Most interpreters have assumed that this event coincides with the resurrection at the last day, but Darby argued that it will occur before the final resurrection.
- The Plymouth Brethren, to whom Darby belonged, did not become a large denomination, but Darby's teachings have had a wide currency.
- Members of many churches accepted his **theory**, and during the twentieth century it reached new heights of popularity.
- C.I. **Scofield**, in his notes to the Scofield Bible, first published in 1909, preserved the general pattern of Darby's interpretation.
- Dispensationalism grew in popularity during the second half of the twentieth century.
- "Our generation," Walvoord observes, "may well be the last before **Christ** returns to remove believers from the earth."
- In the second half of the twentieth century, the most popular statement of the Dispensationalist viewpoint has been that of Hal **Lindsey**, whose works have sold millions of copies.
- Like Scofield, Lindsey explains the letters to the seven churches as prophecies of periods of history, extending from the time of the apostles to the present day.
- The Apocalypse as interpreted by Lindsey is a book for the nuclear age.
- The Left **Behind** books and movies popularized the Hal Lindsey's dispensationalist viewpoint.

The Last Word on Heaven

Heaven

- We see glimpses of **Heaven** throughout the scriptures.
- John uses this same sense of heaven in Revelation.

- When heavens open, we glimpse God's **rule** on the other side – what we could not see or hear before.
- In the Gospels and Revelation – heaven is a metaphor that tells us there is far more than meets the eye.
- While we can't SEE it, God's world is just beyond ours – God's rule, God's love, God's judgement, salvation, mercy, grace
- Thinking of heaven as a metaphor does NOT mean heaven is NOT **real**.
- Instead, helps us see there is a reality beyond our 5 senses.
- The words for heaven in Hebrew and Greek point us in two directions.
- Heavens are the visible sky above us (God made the Heavens and the Earth).
- Heaven is also the invisible realm of **God** invading our world.
- Interpreters clarify this by using the English word "sky" for that above us and Heaven for what we don't see.
- In Revelation, John's vision constantly rolls back the veil between Heaven (what we can't see) and earth (what we can).

John's vision of Heaven

- In C.21, John gives us a short, general description of holy city, New Jerusalem.
- He then spends the rest of the chapter and parts of c.22 elaborating on this **vision**.
- The first 9 verses give us a description of the eternal blessedness of God's people in the new earth and new heaven.
- This is the vision of the promise God made earlier in Isaiah.
- **New** = new KIND of heaven and earth. The New creation will have some continuity AND will be radically different.
- Emphasis on God's PRESENCE.
- In this new order, God's home will be with God's People.
- In this new order, there will be no more sea
- Sea was a symbol of separation and turbulence; restlessness.
- No more chaos or separation.
- In this vision, **God** speaks for the 2nd time in the book.
- The Consummation and Restoration of creation has been completed as predicted and promised.

New Creation

- John's vision of heaven is not the expected ending, but a fresh beginning.
- Creation draws to a close AND **begins** again.
- The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of Revelation.
- Heavens and earth = everything.
- All of our senses (earth) and beyond (heaven)
- Heaven and **earth** – 2 poles of one material reality - body and spirit.
- Jesus prays – God's will "on earth as it is in heaven."
- Heaven is not Remote – it is immediate.
- Heaven is not something we wait for until we die.
- Heaven IS now, just barely out of our range of senses.

- John's vision of heaven is not the promise of anything other than what we have already experience in faith.
- It does promise MORE.
- The completion of today. The End of now and the beginning of what is next.
- Don't settle for less!
- Too often we interpret heaven in terms of **earth**.
- Let us interpret earth in terms of heaven.
- Heaven is not a fantasy.
- John's vision throughout Revelation demonstrates we have access to heaven NOW.
- The invisibility of God's realm today will be visible to us in the future.
- In these passages – John rewrites Genesis, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jesus
- Confirming the promises made through centuries by people of **faith**.
- The presence of God – the realm of God's rule – has invaded our world and our lives!
- Thanks be to God. Amen.