

The New Heavens and New Earth (Isaiah 65:17-25)

The contrast between the old and the new in Isaiah 65 reminds us that what we have in Adam, sin and death and their consequences, is part of the old. Our hope of newness focuses on what Jesus has achieved by His death and resurrection. God “has given us new birth by His great mercy, through raising Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pt 1:3). Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Look, they have become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). For believers in Christ, what is new is already so, but much of it is unseen and grasped by faith. In baptism, we began a new life, as people joined to Christ’s resurrection and His life to God (Rm 6:4). We “put on the new self, which is created to be like God, truly righteous and holy” (Eph 4:24). Through faith in the Gospel “we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Rm 7:6). Already we drink “the cup of the New Testament in Christ’s blood” (1 Cor 11:25). What is old is still very obvious. The new creation is still largely a matter of faith and hope. “According to His promise, we look forward to new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pt 3:13). We look forward to the New Jerusalem, receiving a new name, and singing the new song (Rv 14:3).

The section in Isaiah 65 about the new heaven and new earth is taken up by the apostle John, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away; and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband” (Rv 21:1-2). In many sections of Isaiah, God Himself is the speaker, and, in others, Isaiah responds, comments, and explains. In Isaiah 65:17-25 the LORD is speaking directly. Isaiah adds, as he often does, “The LORD has said” (v. 25).

The picture of eternal life is a series of contrasts with this present existence. There will be no more weeping and crying. Human beings have an inkling of eternity, but their thinking is conditioned by the passage of time and the inevitability of mortality, and they cannot get their minds around a life that will not end. Isaiah expresses it in ways that seem to fall short of unending life. “No longer will there be a baby in it who lives for only a few days or an old man who does not live out his days” (65:20). The passage still speaks about infancy and old age. During the early time on earth, when death already reigned, Adam and some of his line lived for over nine hundred years, and were between sixty-five and over one hundred and eighty years old when they had their first sons. Isaiah does not describe the new heaven and earth as unending life, as we might have expected, but as very long time. He speaks as though there will still be death in v. 20: “For anyone who dies at a hundred years old will still be a young man. Anyone who fails to reach a hundred years old when he dies will be regarded as cursed” However, because there will be no death in eternal life (Rv 21:4), we must regard this as a poetic statement for the point of making the great contrast.

Our present lives are often spoilt by the realisation that hard work has been a failure. The people in Judah had frequently had the painful experience building houses without living in them for long. They had often planted vineyards but failed to enjoy their fruit for long. Enemy invaders had come in and plundered the land. This will no longer be so in the new heavens and new earth. The new earth is described as the joy the results of work in the fields: “They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” “They will not toil for nothing.”

Some trees live much longer than the span of human life. Eternity is described here in terms of long time again in the comparison with the long life of a tree. “The days of My people will be like the days of a tree.”

One of the saddest aspects of our present life is that some children are stillborn or born with defects and all kinds of physical and intellectual limitations. Some of the saddest things we see on television are pictures of children in parts of Africa that are listless because they are undernourished. We think of the sorrow that their parents must have, that their children have no prospect of a happy, long life. Often young children are victims of indiscriminate warfare. The LORD describes eternal life by this contrast, “They will not bear children for sudden calamity.” The fact of death and its many accompaniments means that people often do not live long enough to enjoy a close relationship with their children and grandchildren. Although there will be no more marriage in eternal life, this, too, will be different. “They will be the offspring of those whom the LORD has blessed, and their children will be with them” Isaiah describes the absence of danger in this way: “The nursing child will play near the hole of the cobra. The weaned child will put out his hand on the viper’s nest-hole” (Isa 11:8).

The glimpse of the new heaven and earth includes a contrast with the life of animals there. Our present existence is red in tooth and claw. Many animals get their food by catching and killing other animals. We think of some creatures in our present world in entirely negative terms, because of the nuisance and harm that they do, like flies, fleas, mosquitoes, and snakes. They too are caught up in the futility to which our present world is subjected because of human sin and groan because of it (Rm 8:18-22). We find it hard to imagine the same

creatures no longer causing annoyance, danger, and death. “The wolf and the lamb will graze together. The lion will eat straw like the ox, but the snake’s food will be dust. They will not do any harm or destroy anything anywhere on My holy mountain’, the LORD has said.”

We tend to regard these descriptions as non-literal pictures of the peace between God and man that the Gospel brings about even now, and of the unending peace that will characterise eternal life. Should they be discounted, so that we think only of spiritual things and discard the literal pictures? Eternal life is described by a series of other pictures in the Bible, as a feast in the presence of the patriarchs, and as a city that is a perfect cube of twelve thousand furlongs (Rv 21:16). We can imagine a city 1500 miles or 2500 kilometres square. Can we imagine one as high as that? The foundations of precious stones, the gates of pearl, and the streets of gold seem unbelievable. It is hard to imagine the absence of the sun and of night (Rv 21:23, 25).

Is all this simply a “beautiful isle of somewhere,” to be dissolved as imaginative poetry? The Christian belief in the resurrection of the body points in the other direction. Bodies have size and occupy space. Our same bodies will be raised, instantly changed, and made glorious, so that they will be appropriate for life in the new heaven and earth. However, these same eyes will see the Lord, and we shall be like Him (1 Jn 3:2).

The essential thing about eternal life is being with our Saviour (Jn 14:3). There the central point of the various covenants mentioned in the Bible will be fulfilled, when He will be our God and we shall be His people. Not only will the redeemed be glad and rejoice, but the LORD Himself will also “rejoice over Jerusalem and be glad about [His] people” (Is 65:19).

As always, eternal life is God’s unmerited gift. The new heaven and earth will be created by God’s almighty power, as the first heaven and earth were. Those who will be in it will owe their presence to His grace and blessing alone. The LORD refers to the people in the new heaven and earth as “My chosen people,” (v.22) and He says, “They will be the offspring of those whom the LORD has blessed” (v. 23). We look forward to this transformation of our human nature and our environment, when the curse of sin will be lifted, lifespans are extended, and peace becomes an aspect even of the animal kingdom. In the light of the coming destruction of the world by fire (2 Pt 3:7), alarmist talk about an atomic holocaust, global warming, and the rest is not nearly pessimistic enough, and efforts to put down terrorism and sign protocols to “save the world” are not nearly optimistic enough.