



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 71-81)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Leaving “Left Behind” Behind
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 82-87)
- 📖 Death, Resurrection, New Creation
(*Apocalyptic Vision*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

What John sees — “a new heaven and a new earth” — is not a replaced, but a redeemed heaven and earth. They teem with life precisely because the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and the obstacles to intimacy are removed. Intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it involves community relationships with all those who love and serve God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-8

Meditation[†]

Rabbi Mendel wanted to know what heaven and hell looked like, and the prophet Elijah took him to show him. Elijah led him into a large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a huge pot of spoons that were longer than their arms, and because the people could not eat with these spoons, they sat around the table and starved. Rabbi Mendel found this room and what he saw there so terrible that he quickly ran outside.... Then Elijah took Rabbi Mendel to heaven and into another large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a big pot of steaming soup on it. Around the table sat people with the same spoons, but they did not have to starve because they were feeding each other.

Dorothee Soelle (1929-2003)

Reflection

Every few years the great popularity of a movie like *Heaven Can Wait* (1943; remade 1978) or book like Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Life & Death* (2004) reminds us how much people want to know about what happens to them after they die.

“Inquirers could better turn to divine revelation for this kind of insight,” writes Harold Bryson. In the apocalyptic visions of John the Revelator, the “expressions ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ and ‘the new Jerusalem’ give us insight into what believers call heaven.”

John’s striking images must be handled with care. Initially Bryson interpreted them, as many people today are tempted to do, in an individualist and consumerist way. “I once sang about a beautiful place with streets of gold and gates of pearl. I even thought of having a mansion in heaven,” he admits. But now he realizes that John’s visions betoken:

- ▶ *incredible intimacy with God.* John describes the New Jerusalem as coming down from heaven like “a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2b). The rejuvenated city is teeming with life “precisely because all of the impediments to life with God and his people are overcome, and all of the obstacles to intimacy are removed,” Bryson observes. This “intimacy with God does not exist in isolation; it with all those who love and serve God.”
- ▶ *perfect relationships with people.* In the immense city that sports elaborate walls, foundations, and gates (21:9-27), God announces,



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“See, I am making all things new” (21:5b). Bryson realizes that John “did not have the mind of an architect or a decorator, but of a theologian.... [The city’s] newness is in the regard to the redemption of human relationships.”

- ▶ *complete wellness*. The inhabitants of the city shed no more tears, for death and pain have “passed away” (21:4b).
- ▶ *total absence of evil*. “Life on earth is never ideal because of the continual presence of self will, self trust, and self assertion in everybody’s life,” Bryson notes. Yet when John describes the New Jerusalem, he contrasts its citizens to “another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: ‘The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars’ (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others.”

“I once thought about heaven in terms of what I would do and see there,” Bryson concludes. “Now, because of Scripture, I think of heaven in terms of...intimacy with God and with God’s people.”

Study Questions

1. Harold Bryson notes that we are often so caught up in the present that we do not think much about the past or future. Yet, some events do cause us to ask “What is life like beyond the grave?” When have you reflected on this question?
2. Of the four aspects of the New Jerusalem that Bryson notes, which is most appealing to you? How is it opposed to the individualist and consumerist lives we lead?
3. Discuss how the meditation—a rabbinic story about Rabbi Mendel’s glimpse into hell and heaven—extends the insights in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-8.
4. According to Dan Epp-Tiessen in “Death, Resurrection, New Creation,” in what ways is the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave “both body- and earth-affirming”?

Departing Hymn: “Rejoice, the Lord Is King” (vv. 1 and 2)

Rejoice, the Lord is King;
your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks and sing,
and triumph evermore:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus, the Savior, reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
Tune: DARWALL’S 148TH

† Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 159-160.

An Authorized Look into the Life Beyond

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss what events lead people seriously to wonder “What is life like beyond the grave?”
2. To interpret the “newness” of the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21 as a redeemed, rather than a replaced creation.
3. To consider how the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave is both body- and earth-affirming.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Rejoice, the Lord Is King” locate the familiar tunes Darwall’s 148th in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“As our teacher held up a large rocket-shaped song book, we would sit in the small attic of our church on miniature chairs and gleefully sing (or shout) ‘The Countdown’ at the top of our lungs,” Jonathan Sands Wise recalls. “‘Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place for those who trust him and obey,’ the song assured us, and then continued, ‘and though we don’t know when, Jesus will come again,’ so call upon your Savior ‘while you may.’ The song concluded, ‘three and two, the countdown’s getting lower every day!’ with the clear message that we are almost at ‘one’ and...blastoff!

“Though the image of God creating a heavenly home for us ‘somewhere in outer space’ is quaint, and the song a seemingly innocent prompt toward faithfulness and wakefulness, its emphasis on our removal to an otherworldly heaven and countdown toward the second coming of Christ have made some question the truth and worth of both the song and the apocalypse that it seems to represent.” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 82)

Though “The Countdown” can be fun, like much of popular religious culture it is seriously misleading about the return of Christ and the life beyond death. That is why Harold Bryson urges us to turn directly to the apocalyptic visions of John the Revelator when we are ready for more serious reflection on the “authorized look into the life beyond.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide both your reflection on and desire for the new heaven and new earth.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Revelation 21:1-8 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study Harold Bryson interprets the glimpse of life beyond the grave recorded in Revelation 21. This vision of John the Revelator, like other glimpses in the biblical apocalyptic writings, runs counter to the individualist and consumerist depictions of the afterlife in many popular books and movies. By reflecting first on those occasions that cause us to wonder about life beyond the grave, members can be sensitive to one another's life-experiences with suffering, death, and unresolved sin. Some members will have good reasons that they focus on personal happiness, an end to their personal suffering, and reunion with loved ones in the afterlife. Use this study to enlarge the appreciation of and anticipation for being taken up into the life of God through a restored community of all God's disciples.

Gauge the group's interest in further reflection on Christian eschatology. Several books reviewed by Jonathan Sands Wise in "Leaving 'Left Behind' Behind" and Dan Epp-Tiessen in "Death, Resurrection, New Creation" would be appropriate for follow-up studies.

Study Questions

1. The existential crisis of "A severe illness, the death of a friend, or a national tragedy may move us to ask, 'What is life like beyond the grave?'" Harold Bryson writes. As we focus on our own death or the deaths of other people we personally care for or identify with, we want to know what we and our loved ones may expect from a faithful and just God. Additional questions arise when such deaths involve unresolved sin, rejection of God, or despair.

We raise questions about life after death in other, less personal, contexts as well. We may wonder about God's reception of people in special circumstances — e.g., those who lived cruel and unjust lives, who remained severely undeveloped mentally, or who never heard the gospel. Or, we may want to respond to those critics of the faith who object that believers trust God only for selfish reasons.

2. Bryson develops each of the four aspects — "incredible intimacy with God, perfect relationships with people, complete wellness, and the absolute absence of evil" — in a way that is opposed to the individualism and consumerism that pervades our lives. You might divide members into four groups to discuss each aspect, or invite them to select one aspect to discuss together. The intimacy with God involves friendship with all of God's people. The "redeemed people live together harmoniously: they love, respect, care, help, and encourage each other. It is a genuine community where everyone shares Christ as Savior and has been changed by him." Their physical, emotional, and mental wellness allows them to love and serve one another. In their redeemed lives, believers are "free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others."
3. The people and events in the rabbinic story should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally. Rabbi Mendel sees that the resources in hell and heaven are the same, but the inhabitants are different: the selfishness of those in hell is the source of their suffering. Bryson notes that John contrasts the peaceful New Jerusalem to "another group of people who still have a self-centered attitude: 'The cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars' (21:8a). They are outside the city. Believers experience an existence free from their own selfishness and from the self centeredness of others. The life beyond for believers involves the experience of sinless perfection."
4. Dan Epp-Tiessen says the biblical apocalyptic view of life beyond the grave is "body- and earth-affirming" in two ways. First, the "resurrection of the body...[means] the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into and fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine." Second, God will not trash this world, but "renew all of creation and grant the faithful renewed bodies" at Christ's coming. He sharply contrasts the biblical perspective to "the Gnostic denigration of the body and the physical world."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.