

Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith – 3. Is Heaven Real?

John 14:1-3

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A cab driver reaches the pearly gates. St. Peter looks him up in his Big Book and tells him to pick up a gold staff and a silk robe and proceed into Heaven. Next in line is a preacher. St. Peter looks him up in his Big Book, furrows his brow and says, "OK, we'll let you in, but take that cloth robe and wooden staff." The preacher is shocked and replies, "But I am a man of the cloth. You gave that cab driver a gold staff and a silk robe. Surely, I rate higher than a cabbie!" St. Peter responds matter-of-factly, "This is Heaven and up here, we are interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabbie drove, people prayed."

Or... did you hear the one about the preacher who fell in the ocean and couldn't swim. When a boat came by, the captain yelled, "Do you need help, sir?" The preacher calmly said "No, God will save me." A little later, another boat came by and a fisherman asked, "Hey, do you need help?" The preacher replied again, "No God will save me." Eventually the preacher drowned and went to heaven. When he got there he asked God, "Why didn't you save me?" God replied, "I tried! I sent you two boats!"

That's just a little levity to get us started today on what can be a heavy topic to discuss. Throughout time, nearly every religion has had some sense of an afterlife. We see evident even before people could write through their artwork. And in the Bible, we see how the view of heaven evolved over time.

In the Old Testament, heaven was seen not a place where people go but as a place where God lives. The realm of the dead is called SHEOL, meaning *the place of the dead*. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, SHEOL was translated to Greek word HADES. The Israelites were not concerned so much about the afterlife, their focus was on how to live in the here and now. Although, we see this change over time, especially in the period between the Old and New Testament. Near the end of the Old Testament, the book of Daniel we read *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2*

By this time, the Jews had come to believe that in the realm of the dead there were two areas. One was called **gehenna**. This was the place where people were tortured and tormented for being unfaithful to God. And then there was a vast chasm, and across from that was a place called **paradise**. The word paradise means the king's garden or park. If the king wanted to bless you, you'd be invited to his gardens, his paradise. This was the view of heaven during the time right before Jesus. We remember when Jesus died, and there were two thieves who were crucified on either side of him. One of them says to Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus replied, truly I tell you. Today you will be with me in paradise.

We read this in Isaiah 25:6-8

On this mountain,

the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples

a rich feast, a feast of choice wines,

of select foods rich in flavor,

of choice wines well refined.....

He will swallow up death forever.

The LORD God will wipe tears from every face;

Here Isaiah is describing what happens after death as a wedding banquet. In fact, this passage is alluded to three times in the New Testament as a reference to heaven.

In the first century Judaism, wedding banquets were among the happiest moments in life. They were a week-long celebration with dancing and the finest food and wines. It is no wonder they became a metaphor for what life in God's eternal kingdom would look like.

Some of the happiest moments of my life have been our children's weddings. And after the wedding ceremony, there were the receptions, complete with dinner and dancing. So many of the people who were nearest and dearest to my heart were there. There was such joy, laughter, community, and happiness. This is one of my favorite pictures from our son and daughter-in-law's wedding. This was the only wedding that my dad was still living and able to attend. I see the joy that we all experienced so evident on my father's face as he danced the night away with the bride and his granddaughters! This is what heaven is like, a wedding banquet, only now, my dad is reunited with his loved ones who passed ahead of him. And there are no more tears, and death has been swallowed up forever!

Heaven is mentioned often in the gospels, but Jesus doesn't really talk about heaven as a destination. He talks about heaven as the realm where God's will is always done. Jesus' goal was to get heaven here on earth. He's saying, let's live like we are with God already. And so that is why he teaches us to pray, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10* But he also points out that there is a realm after this life, after we have lived faithfully to God, when we have cared for the poor, the hungry, the sick and the stranger and those who are in prison, then at the end of our life on our judgment day when we hope to hear God say, *well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your eternal home. Matthew 25:21*

We see this in the gospel of John. Jesus' friend Lazarus has died and so he goes to Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. But by the time he gets there, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. They're disappointed that Jesus didn't get there sooner to save Lazarus from dying. To which Jesus says, *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me shall never die. John 11:25.* And then he stands in front of Lazarus' tomb and shouts, Lazarus, come out of there! People must have thought he'd lost his mind until Lazarus comes stumbling out of the tomb. Once dead. Now alive again. Jesus is showing that he has victory over death.

Again, at the last supper, Jesus is trying to make it clear to his disciples that he is about to die. And so, he says these comforting words, *"Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I'm going."* Thomas asked, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Jesus answered, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:1-6*

Jesus and his disciples had spent three years traveling together far from home. And unlike today when you were traveling, you couldn't just call ahead and make dinner or hotel reservations. Instead, a common practice was to send one or two people from the group ahead - to find a place to rest, to build the campsite and prepare a meal. So that, when the rest of the group arrived - there was a place for them waiting. It is this same imagery that Jesus offers here. But instead of one of the disciples going on ahead to build a camp - it is Jesus, who is

going on ahead to secure a place for us in heaven. And Jesus says he is going to personally come back and take us there. This is the hope that we have in Jesus.

And then we see that Jesus is tortured and crucified but on the third day, HE steps out of the tomb, just like he promised. This is God's response to our grief, pain and death. God is saying, death will never have the final word. Instead, Christ is risen and because he lives, you shall live also.

Often, you'll hear me quote Fredrick Buechner saying, *Easter means the worst thing is never the last thing*. For many of us, the worst thing imaginable is the death of a loved one. And so Jesus' resurrection is saying, that will not be the final word. That was hard to believe when it happened. Remember when the women saw that Jesus had been raised from the dead and went to tell the disciples what they had seen. The disciples thought the women had lost it! They didn't believe it until Jesus showed up in their midst. And suddenly, they believed.

And then there's the apostle Paul who spent the first part of his adult life persecuting Christians. But he had a personal encounter with the risen Christ, and it changed his life. As we read these resurrection stories today perhaps, we still ask, do I really believe that? Sometimes, we are like that father of the epileptic son that Pastor Bethany told us about in week one of this series, and we just have to say, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

Faith is always about taking a leap and making a choice of what you choose to believe. You look at the evidence, listen to the stories and then make a choice to believe that or not. Atheists choose to believe that God does not exist. That's a faith decision. But when I read the stories of Jesus and his resurrection, I choose to believe. People sometimes ask me; do you really believe that? To which I respond, I not only believe that but I'm counting on it! Your life is different when you believe there is something beyond this life. That there is more to life than the here and now. It makes a difference when you're grieving. It makes a difference when you do something that requires courage. It makes a difference when you think about the comfort you have when you believe that someday, you'll see your loved ones again. I choose to believe this. I can't prove it to you. I can't prove that there is a God, I can only say that I choose to trust what I read about the resurrection of Jesus and my personal lived experiences of the risen Lord in my life.

Dr. Sam Parnia is a PhD in Cell Biology and an MD who focuses on cardiopulmonary resuscitation. He currently serves at New York University's Langone Medical Center. His research focus has been on near death experiences, focusing on what happens to the brain when you're clinically dead and how we can help people come back to life after they've died. Not just their bodies but also their brain, the full person. And so he listens to these near death experiences of people who had coded, clinically dead, with no more oxygen flowing to the brain for long periods of time.

But he finds out from folks who have survived after being dead for several minutes and in some cases hours, that they could talk about what was happening to them in the hospital room. And so afterwards, he'd check with the medical team, he found that this is exactly what they had said. This was at a time when they should not have been able to hear/process thought with the brain because it was shut down. And so he is asking the question, is it possible that our human consciousness is something more than just our brain activity? The evidence seems to say that human consciousness continues for some period of time after we have no brain activity and well after the brain is dead. So, it begs the question, could our human consciousness be connected to something more than brain activity, like a soul, for example.

I have a couple of real-life experiences that I'd like to share with you about this. The first is from my daughter, Emily. Emily worked for five years as an ICU nurse at the Mayo Clinic and a member of the Rapid Response Team. During one of her shifts, a patient suffering a cardiac arrest while sitting in a chair. It's unusual that this would happen to a person while sitting upright in a chair, so the Rapid Response Team rushed in. Someone said, *get the scissors*. (They needed to cut off his clothes.) Someone else said, *call Michael*. (He was the attending on duty.) Someone else said, *we need to get him in the bed*. Fortunately, they were able to save him.

Several days later, Emily was caring for this patient as his nurse. Once learning that she was part of the team that saved his life, he asked, *may I ask you some questions? Whose Michael? Why did someone say get the scissors? Why wasn't I in the bed*. Emily said, it's odd that you can recall all of this. You were, by all accounts, dead while all this was happening. It must have been scary for you to hear all that. He said, no quite the opposite, in fact. He had a deep sense of calm. He had no panic or fear. He attributed that to the presence of a higher power.

Then, Pete shared this story with me. A few years ago, his mother was in hospice care and was expected to pass at any moment. One day, as he sat with her, she was drifting in and out of consciousness. She came to and looked at Pete and said she had had a conversation with his older sisters. It seemed odd to Pete because he only has two brothers. But when he told his brother about that conversation, his brother reminded that their mother had two miscarriages, both girls, before he was born. The next day, she told Pete, "Everyone is up here." And each night she'd say, "Either I'll wake up and see you, or I'll wake up and see your Dad and Jesus." The resurrection of Jesus announces this life is not the end. And when we put our hope in that, we live differently. It's not that we want to die, but we're not afraid of it. It's not goodbye, but see you later and when that day arrives, we know we will be greeted by those who have gone before us.

Another account of a personal near-death experience can be found in the book, "*Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the After Life*" by Eben Alexander in which he describes his 2008 near-death experience and asserts that science can and will determine that the brain does not create consciousness and that consciousness survives bodily death. His conclusion is much like what Dr. Parnia is finding. Alexander wrote: *My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us.*"

How do we explain these experiences? We may, as many do, explain them as our brain's last gasp of life as it is shutting down. But perhaps, like Dr. Parnia and Dr. Alexander wonder, maybe they point to the possibility that our consciousness or our souls survive our deaths.

So, again I can't prove there is a heaven. I can only say that I believe in Jesus, and his promise that he's prepare a place for us in our Father's house, and that he'll come back for us. I believe the disciples and their testimony that Jesus rose from the dead, conquering death. And the resurrection makes sense to me as God's way of saying to humanity that cruelty, inhumanity, evil, sickness and death do not have the final word.

Faith is a choice. We survey the testimony; we look at the data and we consider the ramifications of the object of our faith. Then we choose to believe or not to believe in heaven and the Resurrection. So, not only do I believe but I'm counting on it, putting my trust in him who said, *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, yet they shall live*. And I'm inviting you to do the same.

Let's pray. God, thank you for everything. Thank you for your love, mercy and grace. Thank you for the blessings of this life. Thank you for being as near to me as the air that I breathe. Thank you for sending Jesus to show us the way, the truth and the life. Jesus, I put my trust in you. I believe, help my moments of unbelief. Help me to live my life in the here and now so that I can spend eternity with you. In your holy name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 21, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Lord God, open my hearts to your presence. Touch and heal any brokenness. Lift any despair and doubt. Comfort and nourish me with the blessings of your love. O God, I am here to meet with you and to grow in the warmth and compassion of your love and grace. Amen.

Monday, January 22

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; Daniel 12:2-3

On this mountain,

the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples
a rich feast, a feast of choice wines,
of select foods rich in flavor,
of choice wines well refined.

He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples,
the shroud enshrouding all nations.

He will swallow up death forever.

The LORD God will wipe tears from every face;

he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

They will say on that day,

"Look! This is our God,
for whom we have waited—
and he has saved us!

This is the LORD, for whom we have waited;

let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

Many of those who sleep in the dusty land will wake up—some to eternal life, others to shame and eternal disgrace. Those skilled in wisdom will shine like the sky. Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and always.

Observation

An eternal God would surely give those who love him eternal life. Doubts about "heaven" -- one word for eternal life -- are a subset of doubts about God. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah said when God has fully restored his rule, he will prepare "a rich feast" -- the way rulers in that day marked victories. Later, the book of Daniel more clearly promised resurrection.

God promised to “swallow up death forever,” to “wipe tears from every face.” God’s banquet was for “all peoples,” “all nations,” “the whole earth.”

Application

By Jesus’ day, many of Israel’s religious leaders were sure only they would be guests at God’s great final banquet. They’d missed a crucial part of the vision. In one of many expansive visions in Isaiah, God is imagined preparing a banquet not just for the elders on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24), nor even for Judah, but for all the nations. Do you ever limit your vision of God’s “banquet” to your own church, nation or ethnic group? How does your heart react to God’s generous vision?

Prayer

Lord God, I do not want my walk with you limited to this time-bounded existence. Thank you for inviting me to participate in your eternal banquet. Amen.

Tuesday, January 23

Scripture: Mark 9:30-32; John 14:1-3, 19

From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn’t want anyone to know it. This was because he was teaching his disciples, “The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up.” But they didn’t understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him.

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too.

Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too.”

Observation

Jesus’ disciples winced when he spoke of dying and rising again. In this period [Jewish people] did not normally expect the Messiah to be martyred. Jesus’ disciples expected to follow him to the kingdom -- not to martyrdom. But Jesus fully linked his dying and rising to the hope of life beyond death — “because I live, you will live too.” He said those who trust him have eternal life — present tense (John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47 and 54), and spoke of God’s house having plenty of room for everyone.

Application

Jesus promised that, after he died, he would rise, and then when he returned his followers would always be with him. “Heaven” is not an abstract subject — it’s about whether we believe Jesus’ promise. So, what do you trust in? When you strip away everything else, what is it? At the bedrock in your life, what do you trust in? Christ calls us to trust in him, to count on him.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you went where most of us most dread going — into death itself — and you came back alive! Help me claim your victory, and live and die in calm trust in your eternally loving life. Amen.

Wednesday, January 24

Scripture: John 20:24-29; Acts 23:6-10; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-14

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, Paul exclaimed in the council, "Brothers, I'm a Pharisee and a descendant of Pharisees. I am on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead!"

These words aroused a dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. This is because Sadducees say that there's no resurrection, angel, or spirit, but Pharisees affirm them all. Council members were shouting loudly. Some Pharisees who were legal experts stood up and insisted forcefully, "We find nothing wrong with this man! What if a spirit or angel has spoken to him?" The dispute became so heated that the commander feared they might tear Paul to pieces. He ordered soldiers to go down and remove him by force from their midst. Then they took him back to the military headquarters.

Brothers and sisters, I want to call your attention to the good news that I preached to you, which you also received and in which you stand. You are being saved through it if you hold on to the message I preached to you, unless somehow you believed it for nothing. I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me, as if I were born at the wrong time.

So if the message that is preached says that Christ has been raised from the dead, then how can some of you say, "There's no resurrection of the dead"? If there's no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn't been raised either. If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless.

Observation

The New Testament never pretended it was easy to believe in Jesus' resurrection (and its key role in helping us trust in life beyond the grave). Jesus was patient with Thomas' doubts, and in the end, Thomas called the clearly alive Jesus "my Lord and my God." Hebrew Sadducees and some Corinthian Christians steeped in Greek ideas said, "There's no resurrection of the dead." The apostle Paul replied, "If Christ hasn't been raised, then our preaching is useless and your faith is useless."

Application

The risen Jesus was different in some ways (John 14:26). But he was not a ghost—that was the point of "Put your hand into my side." This was the physical Jesus, now in a body his grave could not hold captive. The Word who became flesh (John 1:14) arose as flesh still, with what Paul would call a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). How can these somewhat mysterious hints about what the risen Jesus was like start to "flesh out" your hope for life with him eternally?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are my Lord and my God. You are my Creator and my Redeemer. Because you live, I too will live forever. I thank you and I praise you today. Amen.

Thursday, January 25

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-4; 1 Corinthians 2:4-9

If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!
Mountains would quake before you
like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.
If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.
When you accomplished wonders beyond all our expectations;
when you came down, mountains quaked before you.
From ancient times,
no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him!

My message and my preaching weren't presented with convincing wise words but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. I did this so that your faith might not depend on the wisdom of people but on the power of God.

What we say is wisdom to people who are mature. It isn't a wisdom that comes from the present day or from today's leaders who are being reduced to nothing. We talk about God's wisdom, which has been hidden as a secret. God determined this wisdom in advance, before time began, for our glory. It is a wisdom that none of the present-day rulers have understood, because if they did understand it, they would never have crucified

the Lord of glory! But this is precisely what is written: *God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being.*

Observation

Scholar William Barclay wrote, "When John said [John 1:18] that no [one] has ever seen God, everyone in the ancient world would fully agree with him." Mark 1:10's phrasing indicated Jesus had fulfilled Isaiah's prayer in Isaiah 64:1-2. And in 1 Corinthians, Paul used the words of Isaiah 64 to indicate "how unimaginably [God's past actions] would be transcended" by the wonders to come through the salvation that Jesus offered.

Application

Do you ever think something like, "If only God would part the clouds and show me the reality of his person and rule, I wouldn't have to doubt"? The prophet had that idea long before you in Isaiah 64:1. Yet Mark 1:10 said that in Jesus God gave us the clearest view of divine reality we could process, yet many who saw Jesus still wouldn't believe. What makes trust, rather than "proof," an important element of your personal spiritual journey?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you came from eternal dimensions that go beyond all I can imagine. And you promise that I can be with you in those unimaginable dimensions for eternity. I trust you and thank you. Amen.

Friday, January 26

Scripture: Hebrews 2:10-15

It was appropriate for God, for whom and through whom everything exists, to use experiences of suffering to make perfect the pioneer of salvation. This salvation belongs to many sons and daughters whom he's leading to glory. This is because the one who makes people holy and the people who are being made holy all come from one source. That is why Jesus isn't ashamed to call them brothers and sisters when he says,

I will publicly announce your name to my brothers and sisters.

I will praise you in the middle of the assembly.

He also says,

I will rely on him.

And also,

Here I am with the children whom God has given to me.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he also shared the same things in the same way. He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death—the devil—by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.

Observation

From ancient Rome to now, the ultimate human threat is, "I will kill you." We still have Roman Empire records in which officials puzzled over how little that threat seemed to

affect Jesus' followers. In a way that those officials couldn't grasp, Jesus, dying and rising again, set all his followers free from even the fear of death.

Application

The human fear of death is so deep-seated that, if we haven't faced it, we may be unable to "be there" emotionally for friends, family members or even ourselves when illness or accident threatens someone's life. Can you accept that one day in this world you will die? Bone deep, do you move beyond thinking of Jesus' resurrection as a long-ago story to "counting on it" to give you peace that there is, in fact, life on the other side of death?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, "fear not" (in various forms) are your words that the Bible repeats most often. Teach me how to look to you as my light even at the most frightening times. Help me live free from a debilitating fear of death. Amen.

Saturday, January 27

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-7, 21:23 - 22:5, 22:17

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring. Those who emerge victorious will inherit these things. I will be their God, and they will be my sons and daughters.

The city doesn't need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God's glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is vile and deceitful, but only those who are registered in the Lamb's scroll of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let the one who hears say, 'Come!' And let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water^[a] as a gift."

Observation

Revelation ended with a set of glowing, symbol-laden pictures of the glory that awaits God's people when God makes our world new. This expanded on Jesus' teaching that, for God's people, the end of the world is about redemption, not fear (Luke 21:25-28). Scholar Catherine Cory noted that "John isn't being transported to an otherworldly place; rather, he's experiencing a new transformed heaven and earth (see Isaiah 65:17-19)." We need to avoid "getting lost in the weeds" of giant jewels and objects more precious than our minds can imagine. The vision used those objects, not as ends in themselves, but as symbols showing that the greatest eternal reward is that "God's dwelling is here with humankind.... God himself will be with them as their God" (21:3).

Application

As Rome exiled him and ridiculed (and all too often killed) Christians, John confidently wrote of a splendid future for God's people. He ended the Bible's big story as it began, using images from Genesis 2 to picture the restored (and if anything, better than ever) garden of Paradise. John's vision put the promise of eternal life into powerful, mind-stretching images. And the exiled seer made it plain that anyone who will willingly live in God's kingdom can choose to be part of that ultimate, life-transforming hope. "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.... Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive lifegiving water as a gift" (21:24, 22:17). Have you said yes to that invitation? How can you live every day in the light of that hope?

Prayer

King Jesus, I am yearning for the world you will make new. I open my heart and ask you to help me start living now with you as my eternal hope, as my God. Amen.