

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Revelation #37

Enjoying God Eternally: Eight Blessings of Life in the New Earth
Revelation 22:1-5, 8-9

So, there I was sitting at my desk a few days ago, staring at Revelation 22:4 and the incredible declaration by John that in the new earth we “will see his [God’s] face.” It sounds beyond belief. We will see God’s face! What does *that* mean? Later that day, during a short break, I logged on to a popular internet news site and saw the headline of an article that had just been posted. The title of the article was: ***What does God look like?*** The sub-title that followed said: “Liberals and Conservatives have different ideas.” Yes, I was sufficiently curious that I read the article, written by a man named Mark Price. The study was paid for with grants from the Templeton Foundation and National Science Foundation.

A research group of psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill surveyed 511 professing American Christians, asking them each: What does God look like? They actually put together what they referred to as a “composite mugshot” of God. The portrait that emerged shows that God is white, young, and clean cut, “not unlike someone from an 80’s boy band.” As for the expression on his face, “Mona Lisa’s vague smile comes to mind.”

They also discovered that those who are politically liberal have a different picture of God in their mind from what is in the mind of those who are politically conservative. Liberals imagined God as “more feminine, younger, and more loving,” while conservatives have a white guy in mind who was “more powerful.”

According to this study, “Past research shows that conservatives are more motivated than liberals to live in a well-ordered society, one that would be best regulated by a powerful God. On the other hand, liberals are more motivated to live in a tolerant society, which would be better regulated by a loving God.”

The study also found that demographics often came into play with our image of God: Caucasians tended to see a white God; African Americans imagined a black God; younger people saw a younger God and attractive people imagined a more attractive God.

A process called reverse correlation was used to create the final image, said the report. The 511 test subjects were shown hundreds of randomly varying pairs of faces, and asked which of the two looked more like “the face of God.” Psychology Professor Kurt Gray, the study’s senior author, said the study revealed *people tend to believe in a God that looks like them*. In other words, it isn’t so much that humans are created in the image of God, but that God has now been created in the image of humans!

I hope I don’t have to remind you, but I will anyway, that God is spirit. Yes, the second person of the Trinity became human in Jesus Christ, and Jesus certainly has a face, but I’m fairly certain that he doesn’t look anything like this image! At least, let’s hope not!

So let’s turn our attention from the ridiculous to the sublime. And it is truly sublime to think that in the new earth, forever and ever, we will behold and gaze upon the face of God. Does that mean the face of Jesus Christ? After all, neither God the Father nor the Holy Spirit have faces. Or does seeing God’s face mean something other than your seeing my face and my seeing your face?

Seeing the face of God is but one of eight glorious blessings that will be ours in the new heaven and new earth. Each of the eight is described in Revelation 22:1-5, 8-9. So let’s turn our attention to them.

But before we do that I need to point out something that is very important. It doesn’t take a genius or a biblical scholar to recognize that the new earth is patterned after the Garden of Eden. But it isn’t merely Eden brought forward into the future. The new earth is a garden of such great glory and majesty that Eden pales in comparison with it. But there is no getting around the fact that in the consummation, that is to say, in the new earth, there are features that harken back to what God had in mind when he created the Garden of Eden, before Adam sinned and God subjected it and all of creation to the curse.

What we’ll see is that *circumstances in Eden were prophetic of God’s ultimate purpose in human history*. But the last things, in the new earth, far surpass the former things in Eden. If Genesis 3 tells the story of “Paradise Lost,” Revelation 22 tells of “Paradise Regained.” *The new heaven and new earth is but the glorious consummation of God’s original design for the Garden of Eden*. What the first Adam lost by his transgression, the last Adam, Jesus, has regained by his obedience.

(1) Perpetual, unbroken access to the very life of God himself (22:1, 17b)

You may recall that back in Revelation 21:6 God promised to all who desire and yearn for him that he would quench their thirst “from the spring of the water of life.” The “spring” is now portrayed as a river! But why does the river of the water of life flow from God the Father and the

Lamb, God the Son, but *no mention is made of the Holy Spirit?* Ah, but mention is made of him! *The Spirit is himself the living water.* But it is not just the Spirit we receive but everything the Spirit does: cleansing, refreshing, empowering, etc.

This picture is clearly drawn from the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis 2:10. There we read that “a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.” In Ezekiel’s vision of the temple he is shown a flow of water coming from beneath the threshold. It was at first only ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep. We then read in Ezekiel 47:5 that “it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.”

We can’t be certain but it is likely that the ever-increasing depths of the water points to the increasing power of God’s grace as it advances in redemptive history. In other words, as we approach the return of Christ and the consummation of all things in the new earth, the presence of God’s power will grow and its impact will deepen until there are no limits to it.

This verse is also an echo or perhaps even a fulfillment of Psalm 46:4 – “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High” (cf. Rev. 7:17).

But why do I say that his river of “water” is most likely a reference to the Holy Spirit, or better still, to all the glorious blessings that the Holy Spirit brings to us? We see this in John’s gospel. It begins in John 4 with Jesus and his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. . . . [For] whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10, 14).

A bit later in John’s gospel, we hear Jesus say this:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

Notice that the water flows from the throne where the Father and the Lamb, Jesus Christ, are sitting. This “water” is the Holy Spirit who brings us into the highest possible experience not only of himself but also of the Father and the Son. That, then, is the first of eight blessings that are promised to us. We could stop there. Who needs anything more? But there is more!

(2) Perpetual, unbroken access to the tree of life (22:2)

We read in v. 2 that this river of life that symbolizes the Holy Spirit flows “through the middle of the street of the city” and that “on either side of the river” is the “tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.” Thus once again we hear echoes of Eden, for it was in that original garden that the tree of life was first seen. Now it appears yet again.

It is possible that the street and the river are parallel with each other with trees growing between them. More likely v. 2a goes with v. 1b, in which case the “river of the water of life” is located “in the middle of” the city’s street. Likewise, the “tree of life” should be taken as a collective reference to a multitude of trees that line up on both sides of the river (as is the case in Ezek. 47:12). In other words, the one tree of life in the first garden of Eden has now become many trees of life in the consummated state of the second garden.

It's also possible that the “tree” of life is a reference to the cross! In Acts the cross is often referred to as a “tree” (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29). See especially 1 Peter 2:24. In any case, we will have free and unhindered access to the tree of life and its many fruits. This points to the unending pleasure and satisfaction that is granted to God’s people in this consummated Garden of Eden.

(3) Sustained health and happiness (22:2)

The healing effects of the tree(s) of life extend to all peoples (“nations”) who have believed the gospel. This cannot be pressed literally, for according to 21:4 there will be no more death or pain or sorrow that require healing in the eternal state. Again, as we have seen so many times before, John uses imagery that corresponds to earthly realities with which he is familiar to describe eternal realities beyond his comprehension.

Also, if the city “has no need of the sun or the moon to shine upon it” (21:23), the *monthly* yielding of fruit, which would otherwise be based on solar days and lunar months, must also be figurative. Thus ***the “healing” leaves indicate the complete absence of physical and spiritual want.*** It points to the abundant provision and perpetual availability of life and power and grace to meet every imaginable need. Johnson put it this way:

“The imagery of abundant fruit and medicinal leaves should be understood as symbolic of the far-reaching effects of the death of Christ in the redeemed community, the Holy City. So powerful is the salvation of God that the effects of sin are completely overcome. The eternal life God gives the redeemed community will be perpetually available, will sustain, and will cure eternally every former sin” (203).

You may recall that after Adam and Eve had sinned, God placed the angelic cherubim “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24). But not now! There is nothing standing between us and the enjoyment of true life forever in God’s loving presence.

(4) The permanent, eternal banishment of the curse (22:3a)

This tells us about the reversal of the Fall. What Adam set in motion by his disobedience is now overcome and replaced by the blessing that Christ set in motion by his obedience.

The reference to “anything accursed” likely points to the global effects of Adam’s fall. Everything that was subjected to the curse, material creation, humanity, our bodies, our broken relationships, etc. will be eliminated in the new earth.

Richard Phillips points out that there are 1,189 chapters in the Bible and all but four of them describe what takes place under the curse. The first two chapters of Genesis and the final two chapters of Revelation show life as God intended it to be and life as God will ultimately make it to be: free from every last vestige of the curse!

(5) Unending enjoyment of God / worship (22:3b, 8-9)

The fifth of the eight blessings is unhindered, endless enjoyment of God in praise and adoration. We read in v. 3b – ***“and his servants will worship him!”***

Let’s skip down to vv. 8-9. There we see how critically important it is for us to worship God and only God. Hear the warning of the angel who speaks to all of us who are tempted to worship and love and cherish anything but God: ***“You must not do that!”***

“You must not do that!” (v. 9). You are tempted to worship sex. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship success. Don’t do that! You, like John, are tempted to worship angels. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship money and possessions. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship some athletic hero or Hollywood star. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship yourself. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship peace and comfort and the security of life in the western world. Don’t do that! You are tempted to worship the earth or the sky or the oceans. Don’t do that! Worship God!

Worship in the new heaven and new earth will be endlessly fresh. It will never grow old or boring, because ***God is infinitely appealing and infinitely fascinating.*** Think with me briefly about the infinity of God. When we say that God is infinite we mean that there is no end to what is true of him. He never runs out of characteristics or features or fascinating facts about his personality and power. When you and I worship on a Sunday, many of you struggle to endure for 30 minutes. You sing a few songs and focus on a handful of truths about God, and then you’re done. You’re ready to move on to something else. Not in the new earth! Every moment of every day we will discover new and exciting things about God. Every moment of our life throughout eternity some fresh and previously unknown thing about God will captivate us and overwhelm us.

Let me give you just one example of what I mean. Consider what Paul says in Ephesians 2:7. God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him ***“so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”***

Making us alive in Christ and setting us free from the guilt and bondage of spiritual death was only the *penultimate* purpose of God. The *ultimate* motivation in God's heart for saving lost souls was so that we might become, throughout all eternity, trophies on display for all to see the magnificence and the surpassing riches of God's grace in kindness in Christ!

Paul's language is carefully chosen. He employs the plural "ages" to accentuate the stunning reality that redeemed sinners will bear ceaseless witness to the mercy of God, both now and hereafter. Like waves incessantly crashing on the shore, one upon another, so the ages of eternity future will, in endless succession, echo the celebration of sinners saved by grace, all to the glory of God. There will not be in heaven a one-time momentary display of God's goodness, but an everlasting, ever-increasing infusion and impartation of divine kindness that intensifies with every passing moment.

To emphasize both the extravagance and inexhaustible plenitude of God's display of grace, Paul makes four points.

First, God is going to put on a continuing and perpetual public display of his "grace" toward us! Heaven is not one grand, momentary flash of excitement followed by an eternity of boredom. Heaven is not going to be an endless series of earthly re-runs! There will be a new episode of divine grace every day! ***A new revelation every moment of some heretofore unseen aspect of the unfathomable complexity of divine compassion.*** A new and fresh disclosure of an implication or consequence of God's mercy, every day. A novel and stunning explanation of the meaning of what God has done for us, without end.

Second, it isn't merely his grace, but the "wealth" or "riches" of his grace. God isn't simply gracious: his grace is deep, wide, high, wealthy, plentiful, abounding, infinitely replenishing.

Third, as if mere grace weren't enough, Paul refers to the "immeasurable" or "surpassing" riches of his grace! His grace cannot be quantified. His mercy exceeds calculation.

Finally, one particular aspect of God's grace is going to be uniquely highlighted and experienced: his kindness! There is a deeply passionate and emotional dynamic in God's gracious affection for us that entails tenderness and gentleness and longsuffering and joy and heartfelt compassion.

Will there ever be an end to this grace? Does it suffer from entropy? Will it ultimately evaporate? Is there a specified quantity to God's kindness that will slowly diminish and someday run dry? The point of Paul's effusive language is to emphasize that the grace of God in Christ is endlessly infinite, endlessly complex, endlessly deep, endlessly new, endlessly fresh, endlessly profound. God is infinite. Therefore, so too are his attributes. Throughout the ages to come, forever and ever, we will be the recipients each instant of an ever increasing and more stunning, more fascinating, and thus inescapably more enjoyable display of God's grace than before.

With that unending and ever-increasing *display* will come an unending and ever-increasing *discovery* on our part of more of the depths and greatness of God's grace. We will learn and grasp and comprehend more of the height and depth and width and breadth of his saving love. We will see ever new and always fresh displays and manifestations of his kindness. The knowledge we gain when we enter heaven will forever grow and deepen and expand and intensify and multiply.

We will constantly be more amazed with God, more in love with God, and thus ever more relishing his presence and our relationship with him. Our experience of God will never reach its consummation. We will never finally arrive, as if upon reaching a mountain peak we discover there is nothing beyond. Our experience of God will never become stale. It will deepen and develop, intensify and amplify, unfold and increase, broaden and balloon. Our relishing and rejoicing in God will sharpen and spread and extend and progress and mature and flower and blossom and widen and stretch and swell and snowball and inflate and lengthen and augment and advance and proliferate and accumulate and accelerate and multiply and heighten and reach a crescendo that will even then be only the beginning of an eternity of new and fresh insights into the majesty of who God is!

There never will come a time in heaven when we will know all that can be known or see or feel or experience or enjoy all that can be enjoyed. We will never plumb the depths of gratification in God nor reach its end. Our satisfaction and delight and joy in him are subject to incessant increase. When it comes to heavenly euphoria, words such as termination and cessation and expiration and finality are utterly inappropriate and inapplicable.

If our ideas and thoughts of God increase in heaven, then so also must the joy and delight and fascination which those ideas and thoughts generate. We enter heaven with a finite number of ideas about God, with obvious limits on what we know of him. There is no indication that everything that can be known of God will be known all at once and forever. How could a finite being *ever* know all there is to know of an infinite being?

With increased knowledge comes intensified love. As understanding grows, so too does affection and fascination. With each new insight comes more joy, which serves only to stoke the fires of celebration around the throne. All of this accelerates our growth in holiness. When the soul is filled with ever-increasing depths of knowledge, love, joy, and worship, the more it is conformed to the image of Christ. In other words, ***the more we like God the more like God we become!***

New ideas, new revelation, new insights, new applications, together with new connections between one idea and another all lead to deeper appreciation for God and thus fuel the flames of worship. And just when you think you're going to *explode* if you learn anything more or hear anything fresh or see anything new, God expands your heart and stretches your mind and broadens your emotions and extends every faculty to take in yet more and more and more, and so it goes forever and ever.

(6) Unhindered, unparalleled intimacy with God (22:4a)

Ah, we've finally arrived at the vision of God's face. What does this mean? In one sense it is to be taken quite literally. **We will see Jesus' face.** In case you didn't know, God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, when he became a human being in Jesus Christ became a human being forever. Eternally! The incarnation will never end. It will never be reversed. There will never be a time in eternity future when God the Son isn't incarnate as Jesus the man. And we will see his face.

However, to "see his face" is more than physical sight. It is certainly that, but it also means to know him in the depths of who he is, to enjoy him in all his glory, to experience and feel his love for us and to go deeper into intimacy and affection with him than we could possibly imagine in this life.

Thus to see God's face means not only that we will literally see Jesus but that we will experience ever-increasing insight and comprehension of ever-expanding truths about what God is like! The "face" of a person gives expression to who they really are. We will see and know God in ways that we could never begin to grasp in this life.

This is remarkable given the consistent testimony of Scripture that in this life, as long as we are in this fallen, perishable body and live under the lingering curse of sin and death, no one can "see" God and live:

"But [God] said, 'you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live'" (Exod. 33:20).

[Jesus declared]: "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18a).

"he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:15-16).

But what has been true ever since the fall of man in Eden will no longer obtain for the children of God in the new heaven and new earth! What are the characteristics of this "vision" or "sight" of God's face?

- It will be utterly **transparent**. Paul says that now "we see through a glass darkly." But God will one day unveil himself in all his resplendent brilliance, glory, and clarity for us to see!
- It will be altogether **transcendent**. It will in every conceivable respect transcend the glory and majesty of anything we have ever seen on this earth. It will transcend any and all joy we have experienced here. We will never grow weary of seeing him!

- It will be totally *transforming*. By his grace we become wholly pure in heart.

We are told in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another.” In the new earth the final stage of this transformation will be attained. We will, by God’s grace, reach the final degree of glory. Just as the vision of Christ in the present (in Scripture) sanctifies us progressively, the vision of Christ in the future will sanctify us wholly. It is our experience of Christ that sanctifies. If progressive assimilation to the likeness of Christ results from our present beholding of him through a glass darkly, to behold him face to face, i.e., “to see him as he is,” will result in instantaneous perfection or glorification.

John spoke of this in 1 John 3:2-3, where he said:

“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because *we shall see him as he is*. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3).

What is the precise causal relationship between this vision of Christ and final glorification? Two views are possible:

On the one hand, it may be that we shall see Christ *because* we are like him; likeness, then, is the *condition* of seeing him (cf. Matt. 5:8; Heb. 12:14). Thus, this view says that holiness is a prerequisite to the vision of Christ and thus must precede it (the holiness, of course, is God given, not earned by man).

More likely, however, is that he shall appear, we will see him, and as a result of seeing him we shall be made like him. I.e., in his presence sin will be eradicated from us and we will reflect his glory and through the majesty of that moment we will be made like him.

(7) The joy of always and forever belonging to God (22:4b)

We have already come across this truth in the form of a promise. Now in the new earth we enter into its fulfillment. Jesus promised in Revelation 3:12 that on the one who conquers he “will write on him the name of my God.” This is the same truth that we encountered in Revelation 7:2-3 where God’s people are “sealed . . . on their foreheads.” This is God’s way of saying: ***“You belong to me! You are mine! I will never, ever let you go! Nothing will harm you. No one can snatch you out of my hand. I’ve branded you with my own name.”***

Just as the “mark” of the beast signified loyalty to him, the mark of God on our foreheads reminds us that he purchased us and that we belong to him.

[We've already talked about the meaning and blessing of living in the "light" of God himself (see Rev. 21:23, 25), so we move to the eighth and final blessing.]

(8) Eternal co-regency with Christ / ruling and reigning forever (22:5b)

Over whom or what shall we reign? John doesn't tell us. It's possible that we will reign over (a) holy angels, (b) fallen angels (in hell), and (c) the created realm (animals in eternity?). Could it be that God has purposes and plans for new worlds over which we will reign? I don't know. Although we may struggle to identify the precise manner in which we will reign with Christ and although we struggle to understand over whom or over what, rest assured that God has plenty in store for us.

Conclusion

We saw a moment ago in 1 John 3:3 that "everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." This means that the most practical and purifying thing you can do in this life, on this earth, is to set your hearts and minds and affections on the promise of seeing Christ in the next life, on the new earth! The possession of such hope is *the strongest imaginable incentive to purity of life*. It is no passing fancy; it is a hope securely fixed upon him.