

# Life In The World To Come

## Endtime Issues No. 9

25 February 1999

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.  
Professor of Theology, Andrews University

### Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

In the previous Bible study (Endtime Issues No. 8) we examined what the Bible teaches regarding human nature in the world to come. We concluded that the redeemed will have a physical body like the present one, but without the liabilities of sin, sickness, and death.

This study focuses on the actual environment and lifestyle of the redeemed. Will there be marital relationships in the world to come? Will the redeemed receive some kind of "unisex" bodies or will they be heterosexual like in the present life? Will the new world be a material place like the present one or a "spiritual" realm radically different from this world? Will the redeemed engage in the kind of activities we know today, or will they spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and mediation? These are important questions that deserve careful consideration. After all our understanding of life in the world to come determines whether or not we can be inspired to prepare ourselves and others to become citizens of God's eternal kingdom.

### LIFE IN THE WORLD TO COME

The chief Biblical passages which speak of life in the new earth (Is 65:17-25; 66:22-23; Rev 21:1 to 22:5) offer us only glimpses of what life will really be like there. Thus, any attempt to characterize the life, the conditions, and the pursuits of the world to come must be seen as very limited and imperfect efforts to describe a reality which "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived" (2 Cor 2:9).

**Will there be marital relations in the world to come?** The answer of many sincere Christians is "NO!" They believe that at the resurrection the redeemed will receive some kind of "unisex" spiritual bodies which will replace our present physical and heterosexual bodies. Their belief is derived primarily from a misunderstanding of the words of Jesus found in Matthew 22:30: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven."

Does this text imply that at the resurrection all sexual distinctions will be abolished and that our bodies will no longer be physical? If this interpretation were correct, it would mean that, contrary to what the Scripture says, the original creation of humanity as physical, heterosexual beings was not really "very good" (Gen 1:31) after all. To remove the "bugs" from His original creation, God would find it necessary in the new world to create a new type of human being, presumably made up of "non-physical, unisex" bodies.

**Change Implies Imperfection.** To say the least, this reasoning is absurd for anyone who believes in God's omniscience and immutability. It is normal for human beings to introduce new models and structures to eliminate existing deficiencies. For God, however, this would be abnormal and incoherent since He knows the end from the beginning.

If at the resurrection God were to change our present physical, heterosexual bodies into "non-physical, unisex" bodies, then as Anthony A. Hoekema rightly observes: "The devil would have won a great victory since God would then have been compelled to change human beings with physical bodies such as he had created into creatures of a different sort, without physical bodies (like the angels). Then it would indeed seem that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished. And

then, in a sense, the Greek philosophers would have been proved right. But matter is not evil; it is part of God's good creation."<sup>1</sup>

**Like Angels.** A study of Jesus' statement in its own context provides no support to the view that at the resurrection the redeemed will receive non-physical, unisex, angelic bodies. The context is a hypothetical situation created by the Sadducees in which six brothers married in succession the widow of their brother. The purpose of such successive, levirate marriages was not relational but procreational, namely to "raise up children for his [their] brother" (Matt 22:24). The testing question posed by the Sadducees was, "In the resurrection to which of the seven will she be wife?" (Matt 22:28).

In answering this hypothetical situation, Jesus affirmed, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scripture nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt 22:30). In the context of the hypothetical situation of seven brothers marrying the same woman to give her an offspring, Christ's reference to not marrying or giving in marriage but being like angels, most likely means that marriage as a means of procreation will no longer exist in the world to come. It is evident that if no new children are born, there will be no possibility of marrying a son or of giving a daughter in marriage. This is the meaning of these phrases. The cessation of the procreational function of marriage will make the redeemed "like angels" presumably because they do not reproduce after their own likeness. There are no indication in Scripture that angels have babies.

In His answer, Jesus did not deal with the immediate question of the marital status of a woman married seven times, but with the larger question of the procreational function of marriage, which, after all, was the reason the seven brothers married the same woman. This indirect method of answering questions is not unusual in the teachings of Jesus. For example, when asked by the Pharisees, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2), Jesus chose to ignore the immediate question, emphasizing instead the original creational design for marriage to be a lifelong commitment, without divorce (Mark 10:5-9).

**Single in the World to Come?** Does the cessation of the procreational function of marriage imply the termination also of its relational function? Not necessarily so. If God created human beings at the beginning as male and female, with the capacity to experience a oneness of intimate fellowship, there is no reason to suppose that He will recreate them at the end as unisex beings, who will live as single persons without the capacity to experience the oneness of fellowship existing in a man/woman relationship.

The doctrine of the First Things, known as etiology, should illuminate the doctrine of the Last Things, known as eschatology. If God found His creation of human beings as male and female "very good" (Gen 1:31) at the beginning, would He discover it to be "very bad" at the end? We have reason to believe that what was "very good" for God at the beginning will also be "very good" for Him at the end. God does not learn by mistakes as humans do.

Christians, who believe that human life originated not perfectly by divine choice but imperfectly by chance through spontaneous generation, may find it rational to believe in a radical restructuring of human beings from physical and heterosexual into non-physical and unisexual. They could explain this transformation as part of the evolutionary process used by God. But for Christians like Seventh-day Adventists who believe in an original perfect creation and who celebrate through the Sabbath the perfection of God's original creation, it is impossible to imagine that at the end God will radically change the structure and nature of the human body.

**Cessation of Procreation.** The cessation of the human reproductive capacity in the world to come, as implied by the statement of Jesus in Matthew 22:30, could be seen as a change in God's original design of the function of human sexuality. But this is not necessarily true. Scripture suggests that God had already contemplated such a change in His original plan, when He said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28).

The command to "**fill the earth**" presupposes that God had intended to terminate the reproductive cycle once the earth had been filled by an ideal number of persons. In a perfect world, without the presence of death, the ecological balance between land and people would have been reached in a relatively short time. At that time God would have interrupted the reproductive cycle of human and sub-human creatures, to protect the ecosystem of this planet.

It is reasonable to presume that the resurrection and translation of the saints constitute the fulfillment of God's original plan for the "filling" of the earth. In a sense, the redeemed represent the ideal number of inhabitants which this renewed earth will be able to support adequately. This is suggested by the reference to names "written before the foundation of the world in the book of life" (Rev 13:8; see 17:8; 21:27; Dan 13:1; Phil 4:3). The mention of names suggests the existence of an original divine plan for an ideal number of righteous to inhabit this earth. Had sin not arisen, God in His providence would have interrupted the reproductive cycle once the ideal number of people had been reached. But the cessation of the procreative function of marriage before or after the Fall does not necessitate the cessation of its relational function.

**Continuity of Relationships.** Jesus' reference to our being "like angels" (Matt 22:30) at the resurrection does not necessarily imply the termination of the relational function of marriage. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that the angels are "unisexual" beings, unable to engage in an intimate relationship similar to that of human marriage. The fact that angels are often mentioned in the Bible in pairs (Gen 19:1; Ex 25:18; 1 King 6:23) suggests that they may enjoy intimate relationships as couples.

God has revealed Himself, not as a solitary Being who lives in eternal aloofness, but as a fellowship of three Beings so intimately united that we worship Them as one God. If God Himself lives in a most intimate relationship with the other members of the Trinity, there is no reason to believe that He would abolish at the end the unitive function of marriage that He, Himself, established at creation.

Support for this conclusion is provided also by the fact, already noted, that the sexual distinctions of maleness and femaleness are presented in Scripture as reflecting the "image of God" (Gen 1:27). One aspect of the "image of God" in humanity is the capacity given by God to a man and a woman to experience through marriage a oneness of fellowship similar to the one existing in the Trinity. If human maleness and femaleness reflected the image of God at creation, we have reason to believe that they will continue to reflect God's image at the final restoration of all things. The purpose of redemption was not the destruction of God's original creation but its restoration to its original perfection. This is why Scripture speaks of the resurrection of the body and not of the creation of new beings.

**Renewal of this Earth.** To appreciate the Biblical glimpses about life in the world to come, it is important to remember first of all that in the Bible the eternal habitation of the redeemed is located down here on this earth, and not somewhere up in heaven. Both the Old and the New Testaments speak of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Is 65:17; Rev 21:1) as being, not a different world somewhere off in space, but the present heaven and earth renewed and transformed to their original perfection.

The Biblical vision of the world to come is inspired by the peace, harmony, material prosperity, and delight of the primordial Sabbath. Adam's First Day after his creation functions in the Old Testament as a paradigm of the Last Days, a common designation for the world to come. The peace and harmony that existed between Adam and the animals at creation will be restored in the new earth when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Is 11:6).

Similarly, the prosperity and abundance which prevailed at creation will be restored on the new earth, where "the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader

of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it" (Amos 9:13; cf. Is 4:2; 30:23-25; Joel 3:18; Zeph 3:13). These descriptions convey the picture of a real and abundant "earthly" life in the new world. "The wilderness becomes a fruitful field" (Is 32:15) and "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (Is 11:6).

The New Testament presents essentially the same vision of the world to come. Peter speaks of this "earth and all the works that are upon it" that will be purified by fire (2 Pet 3:10).

The outcome will be "a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet 3:13). Paul declares that the whole human and sub-human creation is eagerly longing to "be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:19-21). John saw in vision the "new heaven and the new earth" that God will establish after purifying this present earth (Rev 21:1-4).

**Active Urban Life.** Perhaps the most powerful image used in the New Testament to convey the sense of continuity between the present and the future world, is the image of the Holy City. Hebrews, for example, says that Abraham "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10). The experience of Abraham is a type of the experience of all the believers, because, as the same author explains, "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Heb 13:14).

The New Testament closes with a most impressive description of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, into which are welcomed "only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev 21:27). It is doubtful that all the details of the city such as the high wall, the twelve gates, the twelve foundations, are to be taken literally. Whatever their meaning might be the vision of the Holy City conveys the image, not of a mystical, monastic life in a heavenly retreat, but of urban life of intense activity on this renewed earth.

Life in the Holy City will not be one of isolation and loneliness, but of communion, excitement, and action. The New Jerusalem will be a complex, cosmopolitan place where all kinds of people of different races, cultures, and languages will live and work together in peace. Life will not be static and boring, but dynamic and creative.

"In the New Jerusalem," Shirley C. Guthrie writes, "there will be community without uniformity, individuality without irresponsibility. The problem of individual rights versus community welfare will be solved in such a way that community serves individual, and individual serves the community, in a commonwealth of free responsible beings united in love."<sup>2</sup>

The image of the redeemed living together in the City of God in interrelatedness and interdependence represents the fulfillment of the divine intent for creation and redemption. At creation, God willed that human beings would find their fulfillment not by living alone, but in working together to subdue and have dominion over the earth. Through redemption, Christ reconciles us to God and to fellow beings, so that we can live in peace with all people.

**Urban Life Sanctioned by God.** The Biblical vision of the Holy City in the new earth suggests that the structure of urban life is sanctioned by God. For many it is difficult to accept this view because our present cities are hardly a reflection of the City of God. On the contrary, they are the places where crime, hate, hostility, and indifference toward God and fellow beings prevail.

The present state of urban life should not cause us to reject, in principle, urbanization as a sinful social structure. The fact that urban life will continue on the new earth tells us that it will be possible for people to live together in a complex urban system of interrelatedness and interdependence without giving rise to the social, economic, ecological, political, and racial problems we experience today. Moreover, this vision of

living together in the future City of God should challenge us as Christians not to abandon the cities en masse by fleeing to the country, but to work in and for the cities by offering our Christian influence and help to solve the many complex problems.

**Activity and Creativity.** Life in the new earth will not be spent in idleness or passive mediation, but in productive activity and creativity. Those who think that the redeemed will live in the new world as glorified guests, fed, housed, and entertained by God, are totally misled. The new earth is not a kind of Disneyland magic world where God provides endless free rides to everyone. There will be no "free-loaders" in the world to come. Isaiah writes: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat" (Is 65:21-22).

The Biblical picture of tomorrow's world is one in which real people engage in productive activity and creativity. There will be no lack of time or of resources to complete our projects. In the field of knowledge today, we only can scratch the surface of any discipline we choose to specialize in. The more we learn, the more we realize there is yet much to be learned. On the new earth, there will be no limit to our growth in knowledge and grace. "Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body."<sup>3</sup>

**Continuity with Present Culture.** Life in the new earth will involve some continuity with what we may loosely term our present culture. This is suggested by the fact that God will purify this earth and resurrect our bodies, rather than creating a new planet with brand new inhabitants.

Another significant indication of continuity is found in Revelation 21:24, 26 which says: "The kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it [the city], . . . they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." This passage suggests, first of all, that the inhabitants of the new earth will include persons who have attained great prominence and power in this world: kings, presidents, scientists, and the like. Second, the unique contributions which individuals or nations have made to the betterment of the present life will not be lost. They will continue to enrich the life of the new earth. This gives us reason to believe that the technological breakthroughs of our time in the fields of computers, communication, and travel will not be lost but greatly enhanced, refined, and perfected.

God who affirms the goodness of the world He has made, and who values our creative accomplishments, will not simply write off all the creative work that men and women have produced, often at great personal sacrifice. It is comforting to think that the value of our creative work will extend beyond this present life to the new earth. The preservation of the unique accomplishments of mankind suggests that life in the new earth will not be dull and colorless, but exciting and fulfilling.

**Absence of Evil.** A most notable difference between our present life and that of the new earth will be the absence of all the things which now limit or harm our lives. The Devil, who is the ultimate source of all forms of evil, will be destroyed in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). Consequently, there will be no more manifestation of evil within us or around us. It is hard to imagine what it will be like to live in the new world without the presence of hate, jealousy, fear, hostility, discrimination, deception, oppression, killing, cut-throat competition, political rivalries, arms races, economic recessions, racial tensions, starvation, disparity between the rich and the poor, or sickness and death.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). These bold strokes suggest far more than they actually indicate. They suggest that there will be no more incurable diseases, no more tragic accidents, no

more crippled children, no more funeral services, no more permanent separations. They also suggest that we will be able to accomplish our God-inspired goals. In our present life, sickness or death often terminates the ambitious projects we are pursuing. On the new earth, everyone will have unlimited time and resources to achieve the highest goals.

**Absence of Fear.** The absence of evil will be evident especially in the absence of fear, insecurity, and anxiety. Our present life is constantly exposed to dangers, uncertainties, and fears. We fear the loss of our job, the break-in by a robber in our home, the break down of our car, the unfaithfulness of our marital partner, the failure of our children at school or at work, the deterioration of our health, the rejection by our peers. In a word, we fear all the uncertainties of life. Such fears fill our lives with anxiety, thus contradicting God's purpose for us and diminishing our human potential.

Scripture uses various images to reassure us that on the new earth there will be no fear or insecurity. It speaks of a city with permanent foundations built by God Himself (Heb 11:10), and of "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb 12:28). Perhaps the most suggestive picture of security for a first-century Christian was that of a city with "a great high wall" (Rev 21:12). Once the massive gates were closed in ancient cities, its citizens could live inside in relative security. To emphasize the complete security on the new earth, the Holy City was shown to John as having walls which are as high as their length (Rev 21:16).

Another significant image designed to convey the sense of perfect security in the new earth is that of the disappearance of the sea ("the sea was no more"-Rev 21:1). For John the sea represented isolation in Patmos and separation from fellow-believers in the mainland. The sea was seen also as a threat to the security of the universe (cf. Rev 13:1; 17:15), especially by the Hebrews, who, not having a maritime force, were constantly exposed to the danger of sudden attacks from the sea. Thus, the absence of the sea from the new earth means the absence of threats to its security and harmony. The same sense of security would be best conveyed to twentieth-century Christians such images such as: no alarm system, no security locks, no homeowner insurance, no security check points, or no strategic defense system. Irrespective of the imagery used, the assurance is that on the new earth we will be set free from the crippling effects of fear and anxiety.

**Absence of Pollution.** One of the most pleasant aspects of life on the new earth will be its clean environment. "Nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood" (Rev 21:27). Freedom from the moral pollution of sin will be reflected in the freedom from the physical pollution of the environment. Life will no longer be threatened by irresponsible pollution and depletion of natural resources, because the citizens of the new earth will be faithful stewards of God's new creation. There will not be "smoking sections" on the new earth, because no one will ever wish to smoke his or her health away. What a relief it will be to be able to breathe always fresh, clean air outdoors and indoors; to be able to drink from any fountain clear, sparkling water; to be able to eat wholesome fresh food uncontaminated by pesticides or preservatives!

Reassuring also is the fact that the citizens of the new earth will be responsible stewards of God's new creation who will not spoil it again. They presumably will produce little waste and know how to dispose of it in such a way that nature will be able to assimilate and process. A perfect ecological equilibrium will be preserved, which will guarantee the well-being of the human and subhuman creation.

**The Presence of God.** The most unique and rewarding aspect of life on the new earth will be an unprecedented experience of the presence of God among His people. "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev 21:3). These familiar words are the central promise of God's covenant of grace (cf. Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10) which will be realized fully on the new earth.

God's presence on the new earth will be so real that "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev

21:23). Believers will enjoy on the new earth the blessed fellowship that Adam and Eve experienced each Sabbath when God came to visit them. The Fall interrupted this blessed fellowship, but the Sabbath remained to remind believers of its future restoration (Heb 4:9). Our weekly celebration of the Sabbath nourishes our hope of the future fellowship with God on the new earth. That will be, as Augustine puts it, "the greatest of Sabbaths" when "we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise; this is what will be at the end without end."<sup>5</sup>

**Regular and Richer Worship.** Central to the life on the new earth will be the regular worship of God. Isaiah describes the regularity and stability of worship on the new earth in terms familiar to his time: "From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord" (Is 66:23). The context indicates that this regular gathering for worship refers, first of all, to the hoped-for political restoration of Jerusalem and of its religious services (v. 20), and second, to the End-time restoration of this earth, of which the former was a type. The prophets often see the ultimate divine accomplishments through the transparency of imminent historical events.

Isaiah mentions the "new moon" together with the Sabbath because the former played a vital role in determining the beginning of the new year, of each month, and also the date for celebrating key annual festivals such as Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement. To them the appearance of the new moon signified worship regularity and stability.

Both personal and public worship will be regular and rich in expression and meaning. In this present life, we worship God though we do not always understand why He allows the wicked to prosper and the innocent to suffer. On the new earth, this mystery will be solved as the redeemed are given the opportunity to understand the fairness of God's judgments. "Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! . . . for thy judgments have been revealed" (Rev 15:4). This revelation of divine justice and mercy will inspire the redeemed to praise God, saying: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just" (Rev 19:1-2).

Worship will be richer on the new earth, not only because of the fuller appreciation of God's mercy and justice, but also because of the opportunity to worship God visibly. "The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in [the city], and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads" (Rev 22:3-4). This text suggests that the worship of God in the new earth will enrich believers with a fuller knowledge and enjoyment of God. In a sense, this is the ultimate function of the worship of God, namely, to experience His presence, peace, and power in our lives. This experience will be so real in the new earth that the place will truly be heaven.

**Fellowship with All Believers.** The fellowship we will enjoy with the Trinity will bring us into communion with believers of all ages and from all over the world. Today we can only fellowship with those who live in our time and in our immediate surroundings. On the new earth, our fellowship will extend to those who lived in every age and country: patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, missionaries, pioneers, our family ancestors, and descendants, pastors, and laity.

The symbol of this grand fellowship is the great wedding banquet of the Lamb: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9). This fellowship will include "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev 7:9). It is impossible to imagine the inspiration and information we will gain from becoming personally acquainted with the most gifted people who ever lived.

At a time when many Christians are losing interest in the world to come because they find it too chaste, too disinfected, too unreal, and too boring, it is imperative to recover the Biblical wholistic and realistic vision of the new earth. It will be a place where every faculty will be developed, our loftiest aspirations will be realized, the grandest enterprises

will be carried out, and the sweetest fellowship will be enjoyed with God and fellow beings.

This glorious Biblical vision of the world to come can fire our imagination, nourish our hope, and strengthen our faith, while we live among the uncertainties and troubles of this present life. It can inspire us "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (Titus 2:13), while we are awaiting for the consummation of our Blessed Hope, the appearing of our Savior to restore this world to its original perfection.

## **FOOTNOTES**

1. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 250.
2. Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta, 1968), p. 398.
3. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, California, 1950), p. 677.

## **Contact Information**

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.  
Professor of Theology and Church History  
Andrews University  
4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Phone (616) 471-2915 Fax (616) 471-4013  
E-mail: [sbacchiocchi@qtm.net](mailto:sbacchiocchi@qtm.net) or [sbacchiocchi@csi.com](mailto:sbacchiocchi@csi.com)  
Web site: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com>