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EDINBURGH

The Season of Rejoicing

The command to rejoice runs throughout the Bible (e.g. *Luke 6:22-23*, *Romans 12:15*, *Philippians 4:4*). It's not the only emotion we're meant to experience but ultimately the Christian must smile and sing, because one day a smile will come over our lips which will never cease, and we'll sing a song of praise that will never end.

In a culture where we're blessed with knowledge that makes our lives (generally) longer and healthier, and cursed with an ideology which says that this life is all there is, we tend to think only of the here and now. This way of thinking can make being told to rejoice seem ridiculous and insensitive when the here and now is horrid. But God is trying to get our attention away from short-term thinking and cure us of our short-sightedness. Jesus' resurrection into a glorified, physical body is all the proof we need that there is life after death, and that this life will be physical as well as spiritual.

New heavens and new earth

When we think of Heaven, we usually imagine clouds, and the expectation is that we will go "up there" and leave all this earthly mess behind us – but that's not exactly what the Bible says. It talks about Heaven coming down to Earth, and new life springing up here.

A city comes down from Heaven to Earth: John is shown this in *Revelation 21:9-27*. It is the size of the world (the dimensions match those of the Roman Empire, the known world in John's day) and it's made of only the most glorious materials: giant pearl gates, golden streets, jewels of every colour everywhere. There is nothing but goodness and glory there. The image of a city speaks of a massive and united population, security, and human flourishing.

New life springs up. The Bible often talks about a desert becoming a garden (*Isaiah 51:3*). God's verdict of "very good" about creation (*Genesis 1:31*) will be true as it is regenerated (*Matthew 19:28* footnote) / set free from bondage to corruption (*Romans 8:21*). We've only ever seen sin-stained, death-decaying creation – and even that is enough to blow our minds and take our breath away. The garden image takes us back to Eden, and the restoration of God's original intention for us, and the promise of abundant fruitfulness.

So, rejoice! The desert will become a garden. Whatever you lose or don't have now, the regenerated world is your inheritance in Christ.

Us

We will be in new, physical, perfect and sinless bodies (*Romans 8:23*) – Jesus is the "firstfruits" of this. Paul talks about the contrast between us now and then in *1 Corinthians 15* and *2 Corinthians 5*, and his summary word for it is "glorified" (*Romans 8:30*). We will be like Jesus is, says *1 John 3:2*. Our physical and spiritual weaknesses will be no more. Allergies will have gone, period pain will be no more, eyesight will be perfect, cancer will have been banished, there will be no fear of getting frail with old age. All the sins that we're so ashamed of, and the temptations we wrestle with daily will be gone.

Think about all that humans can do now, and then remove the shackles of sin and death. Work will be fully restored to its rightful place of dignity and purpose. We will grow and build, imagine and create, collaborate and support, invent and discover. We'll always be growing, I think – only God is unchanging. We will have the dominion that we were always intended to have (*Genesis 1:28*), our efforts will be good and helpful:

Jerram Barrs: *"We exercise dominion now by 'making things' with our hands, minds, and imaginations. This task will be ours forever, for on the renewed earth all the creative glory of all the nations will be brought into the kingdom of God to honour Christ (Revelation 21:24-26). Year by year we will go up from every part of this earth and bring what we have made to offer at the feet of Christ the King."*

God made us individually, saved us individually, and so I'm certain we'll know ourselves and each other. We'll be a brilliantly diverse community: people from every tribe and tongue and nation will gather together in the multi-coloured unity God always

intended, brought together by and in Christ.

So, rejoice! Rejoice when you're sick or when you're lonely – it will not last. Rejoice when you're stupid or slovenly – you will be changed.

God

The new creation will be wonderful, our new bodies will be amazing – there will be so much to do and enjoy and experience... But like the flowers and the decorations, the music and the speeches and the dancing at a wedding, they won't be what matters most. A wedding is all about the bridegroom and the bride, and that's exactly how Jesus describes Him and His church being united at the dawn of the new age. God will be the centre of it all: the joy of a wedding will be what we all experience, ushering in a perfect marriage with Him.

John tells us in Revelation that the dimensions of the city we'll dwell in are of a cube - the room in the Jewish Temple where God dwelt, the Holy of Holies, was a cube. God is going to be there with us like we've never known His presence before.

John Donne: *"No man ever saw God and lived. And yet, I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen Him, I shall never die."*

Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian who has been wheelchair-bound for 50 years: *"The first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees."*

We will really see Him, really talk with Him, really know Him and His love, and truly be His. The greatest moment of your life, the best place you've ever been, most fun you've ever had... everything will have been just a glimpse of what is to come when you meet God face to face (*Psalm 16:11*). God is going to light up everything with Himself, because He is infinite we will never run out of things to discover and love about Him, worshipping Him forever will be a thrilling joy.

Sam Storms: *"The happiness of heaven is not like the steady, placid state of a mountain lake where barely a ripple disturbs the tranquillity of its water. Heaven is more akin to the surging, swelling waves of the Mississippi at flood stage. With each passing day there is an increase in the level of water."* (One Thing)

D.L. Moody: *"Some day you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now!"*

And you will not have snuck in – you will have been invited in personally by the King whose blood paid your entrance fee. He died so that you could have this life (*Ephesians 2:4-7*).

So, rejoice! When He seems distant, rejoice that one day you'll see Him face to face and feel His loving embrace. When you suffer for your faith, remind yourself that the troubles will come to an end, but His rewards for our faithfulness never will.

In the meantime, let your imagination go wild in anticipation of the full revelation of God and His glory! Set your eyes on what is to come: “we walk by faith, not by sight” – rejoice by faith and not by sight. This isn't escapism – it's the real deal of which this life is just a passing shadow.

C.S. Lewis, 'The Last Battle': *“Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.’ And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”*

Charles Spurgeon: *“In our Christian pilgrimage it is well, for the most part, to be looking forward. Forward lies the crown, and onward is the goal... Looking into the future we see sin cast out, the body of sin and death destroyed, the soul made perfect, and fit to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light. Looking further yet, the believer's enlightened eye can see death's river passed, the gloomy stream forded, and the hills of light attained on which stands the celestial city; he [or she] sees [themselves] enter within the pearly gates, hailed as more than conqueror, crowned by the hand of Christ, embraced in the arms of Jesus, glorified with him, and made to sit together with him on his throne, even as he has overcome and has sat down with the Father on his throne. The thought of this future may well relieve the darkness of the past and the gloom of the present.”*

Questions:

- Why do we find it so difficult to focus on our eternal future?
 - How do you react to passages such as *Ephesians 2:4-7*?
 - Which of the three areas Luke spoke about – where we'll be, what we'll be like, our relationship with God – got your imagination going the most?
 - What are you most looking forward to?
 - What can you do to help you fix your eyes on what is ahead more often?
 - How should we be preparing ourselves for all of this?
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Suggested further reading:

- *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn
 - *Heaven Is A Place On Earth*, Michael Wittmer
 - *The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis
 - *Peace Like a River*, Leif Enger (contains a beautiful description of Heaven in its concluding chapters)
 - *You and Me Forever*, Francis and Lisa Chan
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Spotify playlist:

Songs that are about / reference Heaven:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/lukedvd/playlist/04B6dkB3pPYW4KfY9Ln42o>
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