

End Times/Saints Triumphant

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Isaiah 65:17-25

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

We Are Looking Forward to New Heavens and a New Earth

1. A joyful eternity
2. A foretaste even now

^{NIV} Isaiah 65:17 "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰ "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. ²³ They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

Fellow Saints of God,

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Do you see the doughnut, or the hole in the middle? Is the gas tank half full, or half empty? It could be argued that optimism and pessimism are merely personality traits, or that each is an outlook based on our experience. But I believe that Bible passages like our Old Testament lesson for this Saints Triumphant Sunday are enough to make every believer in Jesus Christ an optimist. If an optimist is someone who anticipates the best possible outcome, then that describes us. Based on the LORD's promises here, **We Are Looking Forward to New Heavens and a New Earth.** We'll begin this morning by looking first at the joyful eternity that God has promised us, then we'll see that even now we have a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth.

1. A joyful eternity

The LORD says here, "*Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.*" If that sounds a lot like Genesis 1:1, it's intentional. **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,"** it says in the first verse of Genesis. The LORD simply spoke and it came to be: oceans, mountains, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, reptiles, mammals, and, of course, human beings. Creation was, by God's own assessment, "very good." But when Adam and Eve decided to defy the one limitation God had placed on them, they and all Creation experienced the consequences. Sin, sorrow, fear, trouble and death all pushed their way through the door Adam and Eve had opened. Our first parents' rebelliousness against God has flowed down through the generations all the way to us. The Bible says that when God sees what has become of his once-perfect creatures, he is grieved and his heart is filled with pain (Gen. 6).

God was experiencing that grief and pain as he looked at the people of Judah in Isaiah's day, about 700 years B.C. The LORD said, **"All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good."** (65:2) Isaiah could see this stubborn resistance to God's grace. In vivid language he confessed, **"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."** (64:6) Finally, with perfect justice, God declares, **"Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains and defied me on the hills, I will measure into their laps the full payment for their former deeds."** (65:7) Isn't that enough to make you shudder? The LORD of hosts says, "Have it your way, but pay-back time is coming!" And come it did. More than a hundred years after Isaiah, the Babylonians came roaring down from the north, defeated Judah, burned the temple, and destroyed Jerusalem.

The end of the whole sorry saga? A case for pessimism, perhaps? By God's grace, no. This part of what Isaiah wrote was intended to be a book of consolation for exiles, and it consoles us, too. For those who repent of their sins, who turn from their idolatry and rebelliousness, God's grace is not history. The Servant of the LORD, Jesus Christ, bore the sins of all men and now makes intercession for transgressors. Through faith in Jesus, his Son, God clothes us with the garments of salvation and arrays us in a robe of righteousness. And he promises all those who trust in him a joyful eternity in the new heavens and the new earth that he will create. This is the basis for our optimism as Christians.

The LORD describes the new heavens and new earth, first, in terms of what *won't* be there. *"The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."* In heaven we're all going to experience a divinely-induced amnesia about the former things: sin and its consequences in our world and in our lives. God says the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in Jerusalem no more.

When he speaks of Jerusalem he's talking about his Church in its heavenly glory. The sorrow, the tears, the pain and frustration that are so much a part of this life, will not be felt or even remembered in heaven.

Instead, heaven will be a place of joy—pure, unadulterated, never-ending joy. *"But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people."* The joy of heaven starts with God. He rejoices over his people. God rolled up his sleeves to rescue us. He anointed his Son to be our Savior. He laid our punishment on Jesus and, in that way, defeated all our enemies. In heaven God will rejoice at seeing his plan to rescue us come to completion. And we will rejoice at experiencing heaven and the joy of that place.

The vision of Isaiah, like that of many of the prophets, does not always distinguish what lies in the near future from what lies in the more distant future. What that means is that here in Isaiah 65, some of what Isaiah foresees comes true already in New Testament times after Jesus' death and resurrection; other parts of his vision will come to pass only in heaven. As we listen to the rest of what God says here, it becomes apparent that there are blessings we enjoy as believers here on earth that are already a foretaste of the joyful eternity that awaits us.

2. A foretaste even now

Looking into the future, the LORD says, *"Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed."* Long life is a blessing God has promised his believers even here on earth. When he commanded us to "honor your father and your mother," he also attached a promise: **"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."** (Eph. 6:3) When you see a Christian who has lived to a ripe old age, who has lived to see their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, you are seeing God's promise fulfilled. But even a lifespan of 100 years will pale in comparison to what God has in store for us in heaven. In heaven there will be no death. There we will experience the eternal life, the immortality, brought to light through Jesus and his gospel.

Here's another foretaste of heaven: *"They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit."* That hadn't always been the way it was in Israel. Though they inherited a land with ready-built houses and vineyards already planted, they lost these things as a result of their sin. They were conquered by foreign powers. They would plant crops, only to see the harvest taken by their enemies. How frustrating! But here God promises that we will actually—even here on earth—*enjoy* the blessings he gives us. Just a

few days hence, many of us are planning to do precisely that, as we offer thanks to God for the splendid array of spiritual and physical blessings he's given us, and then enjoy his gifts of food and family and friends. Though we live in a fallen world that the Creator himself has subjected to frustration, our lives aren't just an exercise in futility. Because Jesus has conquered death with his resurrection, the Bible assures us that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58) Our lives have meaning and purpose.

Here in verse 24 we have one of the most comforting indications of God's grace, when the LORD himself pledges, "*Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.*" On account of our sinning, you and I deserve to have God tune us out, ignore us entirely. But for Jesus' sake, rather than tuning us out, he is entirely in tune with our needs. Have you ever known someone who had an uncanny knack for anticipating your needs? A mother or father? A spouse? A secretary, perhaps? That's what God does for us, even now. He is attentive to our prayers. He knows what we need before we are aware of it, and by the time the pray crosses our lips, God is already answering it. But don't use this verse to rationalize your way out of praying. Even though God knows our needs and anticipates our requests, he still wants us to pray. This is simply his assurance that he always hears and answers our prayers.

What follows is one of the best known verses from Isaiah: "*The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*" It was the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson who referred to "nature red in tooth and claw." We've seen the nature shows in which great white sharks eat seals, crocodiles eat wildebeests, and lions stalk zebras. Here is an unusual picture, though: a wolf feeding *together with* a lamb, not feeding on it. And lions are carnivores, not herbivores. But the LORD is painting a portrait of peace, of nature before the Fall and before the food chain included living animals. In the new heavens and the new earth, peace like we can't even imagine will be the rule of the day. There will be no predators and prey. There will only be peace as we enjoy the safety and security of our home above. And even now we have a foretaste of that peace, as we no longer fear God's anger over our sins, but trust that Jesus has reconciled us to our Father. The LORD promises to "**keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.**" (26:3)

A pastor that I knew said once that if he wrote his autobiography, he'd title it, "All This and Heaven, Too." It was his way of saying that God had given him so many blessings here on earth, and God wasn't anywhere near finished blessing him because as a Christian he was also looking forward to blessings still to come in heaven. As you might guess, he was an optimist. As God provides us with a foretaste even now of the joyful eternity in the new heavens and the new earth,

Jesus has made us all optimists. In Christ we expect the best possible outcome.
Amen.