

Stages of eternity?

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

Psalm 23:6

To properly understand the future blessings of the saved we first have to realise, at least in principle, that the rewards don't all come at once! After all, eternity is a long time. To set the conceptual scene of a mind-blowing possibility about distant future ages of blessings, consider some simple facts.

The Abrahamic covenant

Abraham was told he would inherit the Promised Land *forever*, the extent of the estate being specified clearly in Genesis 15:18 as being bounded by the currently-existing “river of Egypt” and the Euphrates River. The promise thus presupposes the continuance of today's geographical features on into the time when Abraham will inherit it. The book of Hebrews tells us that *Abraham will yet inherit that very promise*:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth (11:13).

They were assured of these promises *because they are sure*. If the promise that Abraham was given does *not* involve, in its fulfilment, occupation of the very same land he sojourned in as a stranger it is a hollow sham of a promise. The description of the the “New Jerusalem” — the Christian's ultimate home in the new heaven and earth — obviously precludes the possibility that it will neatly fit within the confines of the territory promised to Abraham. New Jerusalem's geography simply doesn't match the modern Middle East.

Equally significant is Hebrews 11:8, where we read that Abraham left one *place* to go to another *place* which he would one day receive as an inheritance:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

To suppose that this will be fulfilled in the new heavens and earth when Abraham inherits the “world” (Rom. 4:13) fails to take all the evidence seriously. In that case, the place where he *was* (in Mesopotamia) before he departed would equally be part of his future inheritance; the poor man, it follows, was sent on a wild goose chase. God's promise of inheriting the place he went to after leaving his home in Mesopotamia becomes a total inanity if the inheritance also includes the place he left! God does not make meaningless promises!

The apparent discrepancy that appears to crop up if you insist that the abrahamic covenant involved *both* a specific patch of land *and* “the world” (Rom. 4:13) melts away under the light of sequential kingdom blessings—a millennial silver age first for a relatively short period of time followed by the eternal golden age. Saucy (1993, p. 53) puts it this way:

...a simple dichotomy between earthly Jerusalem and Canaan on the one hand and heaven [new heaven and new earth] on the other, with the implication that the literal land promise of the Abrahamic hope has been transcended in the New Testament, does not seem justified in light of the total biblical evidence.

The words of Jesus

Though Jesus Christ did not expound an elaborate timetable or sequence of kingdom

blessings, His teachings clearly imply such. The parable of the ten minas in Luke 19:11-27 speaks of very earthly blessings for those who follow him, involving rulership over cities. One can sympathise with those who would interpret rulership over cities in a parabolic way *if* this parable were the only time Jesus spoke in such earthly terms. But in Luke 16:28-30 and Matthew 19:28 He promised his disciples a kingdom in which they would judge the tribes of Israel. Though one may see a new heaven and earth fulfilment of this in the “kings of the earth” of Revelation 21:24, Jesus’ words thrum with anticipation of a time when his disciples would rule over earthly Israelites.

Most Bible students are agreed that in order to understand the meaning of a passage, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those who heard the words. Christ’s disciples surely would not have thought of a new heavens and earth when Jesus spoke of rulership over cities, but of the Old Testament prophecies of Israel’s future restoration. Though salvation ultimately includes much more than Old Testament prophecies show, it nevertheless is solidly rooted in the Old Testament promises. Let them be fulfilled first, literally. Then let the new heaven and new earth come.

A critically important insight is provided by Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:29:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.

His followers would receive a hundredfold of houses *and* eternal life. Again, what did he mean? Surely His followers would have understood Him to mean that eternal life *includes* very earthly blessings, including land—at least for a while.

The meek shall inherit the land

We cannot brush aside the words of the psalmist, later reiterated by Jesus:

But the meek shall inherit the earth [land], and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Ps. 37:11).

This passage begs to be given a pre-new-heaven-new-earth interpretation. Likewise, consider this passage from Isaiah:

But he who puts his trust in Me shall possess the land, and shall inherit My

holy mountain (57:3).

We Christians tend to read over these words, dismissing them as mere poetry containing not literal truth but only a “general feel” for our ultimate destiny. By some strange logical methodology we feel justified in squeezing them through the mincer of reinterpretation so that they come out paralleling John’s vision of New Jerusalem. We have no right to treat Isaiah’s words in such a way.

Thus, it would seem that eternity comes in stages, with an earthly stage in which the saved inherit “the land”, enjoy a “place” and a “name” in the temple at Jerusalem (Is. 56:5) and offer up burnt offerings on its altar (vs. 7), followed by a later stage in which they “enter” through the gates of the New Jerusalem in the new universe (Rev. 22:14). Any attempts to meld the two sets of eternity Scriptures into one cannot help but do violence to the plain meaning of one or the other, if not both.

Beyond the Day of Judgment

But does eternal life hold only these *two* stages for today’s saints—first, the millennium and then, second, the new heaven and new earth? Or is it possible that yet another stage will be interposed between the millennium and the advent of the new heaven and new earth? Though the idea may sound silly, and highly speculative, the biblical data almost seem to insist upon it.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works (Rev. 20:11-13)

Exactly when, in the great scheme of eternity, do the new heaven and earth begin? *Immediately* after the Day of Judgment described here or *long after*? If any interval of time separates the two, isn’t made clear here. Evidence suggests that we will spend the first part of eternity after the Millennium

(Messianic Age) has come to an end—a considerable length of time—enjoying the *current* heavens and earth before the *new* replace them.

The idea seems shocking at first, the immediate question being “why the delay”? To which the best reply is the flippant-sounding one—why not? Here we will consider the evidence *for* this idea, with three lines of argument being offered. We’ll consider some objections a little later.

1. The earth shall wax old

Examination of the scriptures in the “Fate of heaven and earth” box will reveal an amazing truth—the current paraphernalia of the universe will enjoy the opportunity of “waxing old”. The new heaven and earth won’t be ushered in until the current universe “dies a natural death”. The implications of this truth should stagger our minds.

Some of the passages about the end of the universe speak of its being folded up like a garment, others speak of its burning up. Are these contradictions? Or should they be taken as complementary? In the spirit of taking all Scripture as revelatory, the latter solution is the only satisfactory one.

2. Everything under his feet

Inevitably ignored in discussions of the future inheritance of the saints is the implications of Hebrews 2:8, which says:

You have put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him.

The book of Hebrews continues to tax Bible students, with its complex toing-and-froing between the days of Abraham and Israel and the time of the writer, and its complex interweaving of themes old and new. In sum, the writer seeks to demonstrate that what the New Testament Christian has is better than what Abraham’s physical descendants and subjects of the old covenant had. An integral and critical part of the argument focuses on the superiority of Jesus Christ to the two main icons of Jewish religion—Abraham and Moses.

Though the Jews esteemed Abraham and Moses very highly, they esteemed angels even more highly. The first chapter of Hebrews establishes Jesus’ superiority over even the angels. Then we are presented with an interesting statement:

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him (2:23).

The “so great” Christian “salvation” is shown to be superior to any salvation the Israelites had enjoyed. Their “salvation” or gift from God was inheritance of the Promised Land, and escape from calamity when they repented and obeyed. Our salvation also involves inheritance of the Promised Land, but as Abraham’s spiritual seed, ours is far superior to inheritance in this life alone. Jesus Christ, as the one who “first began to speak of it”, showed that there is a lot more to the hope of Abraham than the people understood, revealing that for Abraham’s spiritual seed, both Israelite and gentile, the promise meant entry into the eternal Kingdom of God, truly a “great salvation”.

Then comes an amazing section. Please read Hebrews 2:510 carefully (see “Hebrews 2:510” box). Can it be that in these verses the author of Hebrews actually speaks of a vital phase of the “great salvation” that entails rulership by immortal children of God over the *current* heaven and earth? One would be setting himself up to be unhorsed by pushing too hard for any one explanation. The train of thought that links sentence with sentence, verse with verse, section with section seems quite elusive to us moderns who do not share the same language and background as the original audience. Here a thread is proposed in the spirit of inquiry.

Can we say that this universe has become arthritic or senile yet? It may be “groaning in hope” like a woman in labour, as the Greek of Romans 8:22 tells, but is it tottering in decrepitude or moaning in moribundity? Not at all. The universe has lots of life left in its young bones yet. How much? According to estimates made by Fred Adams of the University of Michigan (*Discover* January, 1998, p. 31), the lights of the universe will gradually burn out over the next 100 million million years. That would not be the end of matter, though, as protons would survive until 10⁴⁰ years (that’s 1 followed by 41 zeros) from now. Others give a different estimate for the longevity of the universe, some putting the c-boundary (the end of

time) only 100 billion years from now. Either way, it's a long, long way off.

At what point in this shutdown of the universe the decree would go forth from heaven to “fold up the garment” and set it on fire is anybody's guess. One doesn't wait until a garment has only a few threads left before replacing it. But the point remains, death by natural causes lies a long way off yet. The garment is still in great condition—we have God's own testimony in Psalm 19:1 to that effect. If the cancer of *rigor mortis* had already leavened the ends of space the psalmist could never have said that the heavens now declare the glory of God.

The chief challenge lies in figuring out the meaning of the puzzling “world to come of which we speak”. Both before and after these verses (1:1012 and 12:26) the author speaks of the end of the current universe; is “the world to come”, then, one and the same thing as the world that replaces the ancient, rickety one when it finally gives up the ghost? Or is it something different? Could it refer to the millennial reign of Christ and the saints spoken of in Revelation 20:4?

Guthrie feels that “the meaning of *the world to come* is a matter of debate” (1983, p. 84). He notes, however, that the word for world, *oikoumene*, refers not to the world as a system, but the world of inhabitants. This inhabited world, we are told, will be *subject* to “ex-men” who have experienced the great salvation spoken of.

Does this phrase, then, with its stress on the habitable world, preclude the possibility that it has the entire universe in view? Not at all. Arndt & Gingrich (1957, p. 564a.) catalogue its use in this verse under meaning 3. which includes “extraordinary” uses, noting that it can mean “the whole world (so far as living beings inhabit it, therefore the realm of spirits as well)”. In the context of

both chapters one and two of Hebrews, the lesson seems clear—man, made lesser than the angels, will one day govern angels, both on earth and throughout the universe.

Taking this understanding as our working principle, the phrase doesn't refer to either time or place, but merely to man's potential status of superiority over even the angels. As such, man will have the opportunity that appears to have been denied to angels—rulership (whatever that may entail) over the universe, both current and future versions.

Who is the “man”?

Who is the “man” spoken of in Hebrews 2 who has been set over all things? Is he Jesus Christ, or is he mankind generically? Without recourse to Psalm 8, the source of the quotation in Hebrews, it would be difficult to say. Though it is entirely possible that in Hebrews an application is made to Jesus Christ, it is certainly not an exclusive application, for whatever was meant in Psalm 8 must also be included here. Besides, as one noted scholar put it (Guthrie 1983, p. 86), whether one sees Jesus Christ or mankind in these verses, “it makes little difference to the meaning”, as whatever Jesus inherits, He does so as the captain of his brethren's salvation and shares it with them.

But the key lies in the original Psalm, for even the most superficial reading yields the simple conclusion that mankind is spoken of. He is made for a little while lower than the angels, but God's intention is to ultimately put all things in subjection under him. The “all things” to be made subject to man include the very things God gave man dominion over in the very first place—the earth and its flora and fauna. It even includes, specifically, the sea and its creatures (vs. 8), yet Revelation 21:1 tells us that in the new earth there will be no more sea.

Hebrews 2:5-10

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying: “What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

The fate of heaven and earth

Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed.

Psalm 102:25-26

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, the earth will grow old like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die in like manner; but My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished.

Isaiah 51:6

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

Matthew 24:35

You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail.

Hebrews 1:10-12

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.... whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven." Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Hebrews 12:25-27

But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.... But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

2 Peter 3:7, 10-13

Though one cannot prove the case, a reading of Psalm 8 leaves one pondering the question of whether or not David had an inkling that man would one day have dominion over the "moon and stars" (verse 3). Even if he didn't, the author of Hebrews makes explicit what David only implied—though now we have dominion over the earth and its creatures, "now we *do not yet see* all things put under him" (2:8). Obviously, the passage intends us to understand that the time is coming when we will! And it's talking about the universe as we now know it. John 1:3 corroborates this interpretation of the phrase "all things".

True, Revelation 21:7 tells us that in the new heaven and earth, "He who overcomes shall inherit all things". Presumably, the "all things" man will *inherit* amount to one and the same "all things" that will be *subject to him*. So Hebrews certainly does look to an

ultimate fulfilment in the new heaven and earth. But that does not exclude a "lesser" fulfilment prior to that. Can any good reason be found for denying a "this-universe" fulfilment, other than that it doesn't seem right to break eternity up into stages?

3. Tormented forever

One last piece of supporting evidence is worth noting. We read in Revelation 20:10 that,

The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Many people hold the opinion that Scripture teaches eternal torment for recalcitrant humans, calling upon this verse's *prima facie* suggestion that the beast and false prophet will be eternally tormented for sup-

port. But what happens to a human being when engulfed by flames? They turn to ashes—the basic working principle of crematoria.

Eternal torment is reserved for Satan and his myrmidons. They will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where the beast and false prophet had been cast (and perished), where they will be tormented “forever”. Their anguish will not consist of physical pain, as they are spirit, and cannot be harmed by fire any more than they can be dragged into a black hole if they wanders too close. Instead of being consumed by the flames, they will be consumed mentally over failing to achieve the goal that has obsessed and preoccupied them for so long—the ruination of God’s plan of salvation for man.

Now if the new heaven and earth were to come shortly after this event—a matter of years, not millions of years—Satan’s torment could hardly be described as lasting “forever and ever”. But if they were imprisoned in the Lake of Fire for some millions of years while the current earth and universe wax old, “forever and ever” fits nicely.

What happens to Satan and his demons when the Lake of Fire vanishes along with the burned-up earth is impossible to say. Whatever the details, they will be barred from all access to the glorified children of God. Nothing will tarnish the bliss God’s sons and daughters will enjoy in God’s presence forever; certainly not watching unrepentant evil spirits writhe in self-imposed mental anguish.

Eternity begins

Wouldn’t you feel cheated if you didn’t have a chance to *thoroughly* explore our own solar system, galactic neighbourhood and the outer limits of the universe? And though His thoughts are higher than ours as the heavens are above the earth, and may have good reasons to say no, can we imagine any earthly reason why God would hold back such an opportunity, especially in light of the promise that, “No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11)? Of course, only a fool would argue with God should He deny us this rare privilege. If He did, it would be for a good reason, and we will sing His praises for His decision.

To this author, it seems inconceivable that God would create such a magnificent showpiece as our universe, people as it is with untold marvels and mysteries that human

beings have spent untold billions of dollars trying to understand, only to deny us the opportunity of ever really getting to know it.

The above scenario carries amazing implications. Though the new heavens and earth will surely pale the current setup into insignificance, the things our telescopes reveal now *are* nevertheless brilliant, and they *do* sing God’s praises. They are not like a Hollywood movie set, where behind a brilliantly constructed façade lies... nothing. That we might begin eternity by exploring the endless wonders of God’s craftsmanship is a thought almost too incredible to contemplate. Star Trek move over. The saints will go marching out on a journey of exploration and discovery—and they won’t need saucers and bubble suits.

Someone may say, “But I have no interest in stars, galaxies, comets or superclusters”. Then repent. (Said tongue-in-cheek, of course.) If we are growing in love towards God, we will become more and more fascinated by everything about Him and everything He has ever done. Remember the word of the Psalmist: “The works of the LORD are great, studied by all who have pleasure in them” (Ps. 111:2). Before history draws to its conclusion, “... the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14).

If you have no natural interest, try reading a little about space, not giving up too quickly. You’ll be hooked. Forget football and cricket, surfing and sailing, hunting and fishing. They can’t hold a candle to the simple (and inexpensive) pastime of exploring God’s works. And what is more, as your interest grows, your sense of hope and anticipation for your glorious salvation will increase in lockstep.

The universe is a dynamic place, thrumming with activity. Much of it is on such a grand scale that human beings living hundreds of lifetimes would not be capable of really “watching” the activity. For instance, many galaxies right now are colliding with one or more neighbouring galaxies in response to hidden forces of gravity, executing some intricate pas de deux in the process. (To God must go all the glory as chief choreographer.) But the interaction, which can produce some fascinating results, such as “rat-tail” galaxies, due to gravity tearing, stretching or compressing the participants, can take up to hundreds of millions of years to complete. Don’t you want to “watch” a

few? I sure do. Wouldn't you like a front row seat to watch our own Milky Way galaxy collide, first, with the Magellanic Clouds, and then with Andromeda? That's what astronomers predict. Yes, a heavenly symphony is in full swing. I want to hear it, don't you?

Don't you want to penetrate to the centre of the sun and watch the nuclear fusion process taking place? Don't you want to see the energy released, and be able to track it on its million year journey to the surface of the sun, and then ride it all the way to earth? Such a thought might strike one with fear right now; but as spirit, no material substance or phenomenon, not even million degree temperatures, can harm you. The brightness will not blind you. Angels cope quite well with such things—no angel has ever been irretrievably sucked into a black hole by wandering too close. We will be higher than the angels.

Talking about black holes, how about a trip into one? Or a visit to the most distant galaxies and quasars of space? If that doesn't excite us, what can?

Dress it and keep it

But does it make sense that our activity would be restricted to sightseeing—a grand “tour de l'universe”? One cannot help but wonder if, as part of our inheritance, we may have the opportunity to somehow improve it.

Think about it. Scripture makes clear that God made the earth in such a way that man can improve it with proper management. He gave man dominion over both the animals and the earth itself, implying clearly that man has the wherewithal to make the good better. If one can accept this as true of earth, why not of the entire universe? According to current estimates, the universe contains over 200 billion galaxies. Should twenty billion people pass through the portals (not the pearly gates) into the Kingdom of God, that's ten galaxies apiece! Who knows how many precious planets swirl noiselessly around some of those distant stars, forming heavenly bracelets of incomparable beauty? And to think most of us dream of owning a few acres of land on mother earth.

Can we even begin to conceive of the wealth that awaits the saved, of the endless ages to be spent in working with and improving our own huge corner of the universe and, above all, of the delight of ongoing,

uninterrupted personal communion with our elder brother and saviour, Jesus Christ? It's all too much to take in.

Does all this sound just too outlandish? Risking repetitiveness, let's repeat: “No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly”. Should it seem too marvellous a thing that God would give us a share of the current creation for a period of time before the new makes its smiling appearance?

This phase of eternity, should the hypothesis be correct, will not last eternally. Eventually the universe will run out of hydrogen and be replaced by the even more fabulous, glorious new heaven and earth.

Objection, your honour!

Doesn't this theory mean the postponing of the special, new-heaven-and-earth blessings of no more death, sorrow, crying or pain (Rev 21:4)? And wouldn't it mean delaying the greatest blessing of all—perfect communion with God? How does one weasel one's way out of these apparently overwhelming objections?

With respect to the former—the postponement of the wiping away of tears, little can be proffered other than the speculative thought that the wiping away of tears of sorrow and pain amounts to nothing less than the erasing of all memory of earthly suffering. Isaiah 65:16-17 speak of the former “things” and “troubles” being forgotten by man and “hidden” from God's eyes. In that case, the erasure of those memories wholly at the coming of the New Jerusalem would provide the perfect start for the “rest” of eternity. Not until all memory of earthly pain and grief over lost loved ones has been removed could it be said that “it is done”.

As for not seeing God “face to face” right from the outset, numerous thoughts from different directions crowd in on one another creating a degree of tension and disquiet. From one direction comes sheer horror at any suggestion of deferment of this greatest gift of all. But as one marshalls other thoughts from different directions, the horror gradually dissipates, and in fact turns into a sense of awe. We *will* have fellowship with God through intimate communion with Jesus Christ!

When Jesus returns, it will be for keeps; the disciples who watched Him depart once will never watch Him depart again (John 14:3). As part of the Godhead, Jesus Christ is God, though not *all* of Him, not the *total-*

ity of God. Since God is infinite in all good ways, we simply could not absorb the fullness of His attributes overnight; we will forever grow in our knowledge and understanding of His very being. Thus, we would be in no way cheated in our relationship with God if the full face-to-face encounter came later, giving us a chance to build up to it, so to speak, through a period of growing in personal knowledge of Jesus Christ.

If that seems like philosophical reasoning, consider what the Bible says. Does it give any justification for suggesting a long interval between the great white throne judgment and the establishment of new heavens and earth, a time in which our face to face encounter is with Jesus Christ as anticipatory of a later full encounter with our Father? At least one verse suggests the possibility:

*Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus **we shall always be with the Lord** (1 Thess 4:17).*

Far-fetched? Maybe. Maybe not. But the thought that we might spend the first part of eternity with the Lord Jesus Christ in preparation for spending the rest of eternity with both God and the Lamb (Rev 21:22; 22:34) surely should not horrify us, but dumbfound us. Whatever we may think about such an idea, it seems to be the plain teaching of Scripture. Jesus gave His disciples an immensely exciting promise:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to

Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:3).

Surely these words imply that for a period of time at the beginning of eternity believers would bask in the sunshine of Jesus' presence? Implying they would not, at that stage, see God in all His glory. The latter, ultimate bliss comes later, in the New Heaven and New Earth, when believers will "see His face" (Rev. 22:4). But believers will enjoy being in the presence of Jesus "forever" before seeing "all of God". Notice also Paul's words in Philippians 1:23:

For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.

See also 2 Corinthians 5:8 where Paul anticipates the joy of being "with the Lord", as distinct from being with God (in all His glory). Inasmuch as Jesus is truly God, the blessing of enjoying the presence of God begins at the moment the dead in Christ rise; nevertheless, Jesus is not all of God. After spending "forever" with Him, the saints will spend the rest of forever with God in all His glory.

Even if our fellowship with God for the first part of eternity comes through our personal communion with Jesus Christ, this does not mean we are cut off from the Father. We are not cut off from Him even now! He abides in us, and we have fellowship with Him even now (1 John 1:3). If this view is correct, even before we get to see Him face to face we would have fellowship at a *much* deeper level than is possible now.