

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21

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We're nearing the end now of the Book of Revelation. The theme is the New Jerusalem. In the New International Version, Revelation 21 says this: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.'

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21

precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.

The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:1-27, NIV).

The thought came to me as I prepared to speak on this Scripture today that Revelation 21 is like a full pitcher of water and our capacity to receive it is equal to a thimble. There is simply no way in a short period of time, in one hour, or even in one lifetime that we can exhaust all that is in this Scripture and what it is speaking to us about our life with God forever.

The theme is the New Jerusalem.

I. The first verse is showing us that this New Jerusalem is going to be placed in a new environment.

The first heaven and the first earth will pass away. As Hebrews 1:11–12 says of the earth in which we live “They will perish [that is the elements and the earth and the heavens] but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment. He will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed.” And 2 Peter 3:10 says, “The heavens will disappear with a roar. The elements will be destroyed by fire. And the earth and everything in it will be burned up.”

This earth with its eight-thousand-mile diameter, drive through its rocky crust, straight down about twenty miles and you’ll find already a temperature of sixteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Go four thousand miles down to the inner core of the earth and you will find literally we are on hot rocks, nine thousand degrees Fahrenheit. There’s something hot already in the earth and the Scripture prophesies to that time when this earth and the universe as we know it will have passed away. And while it passes away, the great theme of Revelation is God doesn’t pass away. For God stands outside His creation since He necessarily made it.

It is to be replaced with new heavens and new earth to fulfill Isaiah 65:17 which says, “Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come into mind.”

II. When we come across those words “new heaven and new earth” and “new Jerusalem” in Revelation 21, we should be careful to use that word “new” as the Scripture itself is using it and not as we use it.

When we get a new car that new car is new only for a period of time as we so quickly find out.

That new carpet in the house quickly becomes an old carpet. Even in the New World of America of three centuries ago we founded cities like New York after Old York, and New Jersey after Old Jersey. But there’s really nothing new; if you see New York and New Jersey they don’t seem all that new.

Here, however, is new which stays new. And it will always be new. God himself is its keeper.

John must point us to that environment in which the New Jerusalem is placed—the new heavens and the new earth with an underlining on the word “new.”

He is also quick to note a difference in topography, which mark it as separate from the first heaven and the first earth that is the sea is no more. John has many things to describe in respect to the New Jerusalem and the new heavens and the new earth. But the first thing that grabs his mind is no more sea. There is reason for that. In a symbolic sense the Antichrist emerges out of the sea in Revelation 13. What John is saying theologically is no more can evil emerge in the new heavens and the new earth. In a physical sense it also has meaning. For John is exiled on the little island of Patmos and he can look across and see in the distance the beloved places where the sheep of his flock, his pastorate, are gathered and living and it is the sea which separates him from them. He says in the eternal state there will be no more separation. No more cushions where we’re unable to relate intimately to the God we love and the people we love. But all barriers of fellowship and communication have been forever taken away.

That is the kind of environment in which the New Jerusalem is to be placed. Of the New Jerusalem John begins speaking in Revelation 21:2–4, describing its beauty; it has an external beauty and it has a relational beauty.

Its external beauty is spoken of first although it will be spoken of in more detail beginning about verse 19. Here, just in cursory fashion, it is noted in terms of its physical beauty that this city is holy. That is the first word that is used to describe it. That is in definite contrast to the unholy city of Babylon, which had dominated Revelation 17 and 18. It is new. Like the new heavens and the new earth, it will not wear out, nor will it need to be changed like a garment. John sees this New Jerusalem as coming down out of heaven.

In the Scripture there are three possible meanings for the word “heaven.” There are the atmospheric heavens, the thin layer of air, which sustains life on planet earth. There are the galactic heavens or the heavens of the universe. Then there is the heaven beyond that which is the abode of God who dwells outside His creation in a third dimensions, another dimension. It is out of this heaven, out of the dwelling place of God. The Lord taught us to pray, “who art in heaven.” It is in this dwelling place of God that the New Jerusalem emerges from. When it emerges, it is prepared as bride beautifully dressed and adorned for God’s people.

Jesus had said in John 14:3, “I go to prepare a place for you.” We know in His earthly existence He was a carpenter. And what the carpenter has wrought as the New Jerusalem descends for us. The beauty though is not only physical.

III. God is more concerned in introducing Jerusalem to note its relational beauty. God is dwelling with His people.

He is literally, tabernacling with His people. It is a word that is used in the Old Testament to describe God tabernacling in the wilderness, in the encampment, in the midst of His people. In

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21

John 1:14, “The word [Jesus] became flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld his glory.”

Now the same word is used here. In the New Jerusalem, God permanently tabernacles among us. His presence is no longer strictly limited to one place. Nor is it limited to one person, the person of Christ Jesus. But it is a pervasive presence and a perpetual presence.

The benefits of God’s presence is that all tears will be wiped away. Since all tears are wiped away we know death is no more, mourning is no more. Pain is no more and tears and crying are no more. Death is no more. What we’re being told in Revelation is that the New Jerusalem will allow the full development of our personhood. Death cuts that development except God bringing us to eternal life. Death without the eternal resurrection power of God would cut us off from the worship of God and eternally we are designed to worship Him as the hymns of Revelation, some fourteen of them, have so pointedly put before us. Death cuts off meaningful responsibilities from the human point of view. But God has meaningful responsibilities for us in the new age. He said that when He came again He would give to the one who had talents, additional talents of responsibility.

Death cuts off fellowship. But in the eternal life of Jerusalem we will know one another and will know even as we are known. Death cuts off learning. When I die I cease to learn. In the New Jerusalem the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:9,12 have focus where he says “Now I know in part,” implying that there comes a moment when he will know in full. Death cuts off my ability to be in God’s presence if it were not for God’s resurrecting power. And the New Jerusalem brings me forever into His presence.

Therefore in that city death is no more, mourning is no more. To Martha, Jesus had appeared at the death of her brother and said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). And He had not yet even raised Lazarus from the dead when He said that. He asked her to believe in Him

before He demonstrated His resurrection power on Lazarus. He said, “Do you believe I am the resurrection and the life?” (John 11:26). So even in like manner we are called on to believe in Him before we have seen the demonstration of His power in our life; in the final resurrection we are assured no more mourning.

We are assured that there are no more tears or crying. This means that if in heaven tears and crying are to be wiped away then on earth we must have had them. If pain is to be no more than the saints of God must have experienced some degrees of pain on earth. Earth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal. The old order passes away. As Paul says in Romans 8, in essence, “The creation therefore waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed because of the liberty that is to be proclaimed.”

So John sees the beauty of the New Jerusalem physically and relationally.

He also makes the comment lest anyone feel that they are excluded from the New Jerusalem. It is available. That availability is attested to by God himself who in one of the few instances in Revelation actually himself speaks and says, “I’m making everything new” (Revelation 21:5). Then lest anyone should misunderstand, He certifies it by saying to John, “Write it down.” That’s equivalent to writing a letter and putting a seal or a certification on it. This letter is guaranteed. This word is a guaranteed word.

And what is God guaranteeing? He’s saying you can depend on Me. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, I’m the A and the Z. I’m the beginning and the end. And I’m everything in between.” He is the beginning in the sense that He guarantees himself as the source of all life. And the end as He guarantees himself as the goal of all life. He’s saying, “Given who I am, you can depend on me when I invite the thirsty to come and drink. I will give them the water of life without cost.”

The New Jerusalem is open to the thirsty and it is open to those who conquer. But it is closed to the cowardly and the unbelieving and the like.

It's striking that of those who are closed off from the New Jerusalem, John should identify first of all the cowardly as being at the top of the list. Yet when you look at the situation of the first century and the persecution the church is going through and the fact that people are called upon to make a commitment to Jesus Christ which may cost them their life and that some people have walked away from that commitment because they could not bear that kind of decision and had been cowardly. John would identify that therefore as the first exclusion of the new earth. To confess Him before man is to be confessed before the angels in heaven by the Father. But to deny Him before men is to be denied in heaven. This excludes those who do not have a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ.

John then in verses 21:29–22:5— and we won't actually get into chapter 22 today—goes on to give us the features of the New Jerusalem. It's striking as he enters this section that we're introduced to one of the angels that had had the seven last plagues, and also probably the same angel who, in Revelation 17:1, had showed John the city of Babylon. Someone has said that Revelation might be called properly a tale of Two Cities, for it describes the city that is going down, Babylon, and the city that is coming down, Jerusalem.

John had been shown Babylon from the desert, which speaks of the fact that the people of God while Babylon was in ascendancy were really in a spiritual wilderness, a dry place. But when the New Jerusalem is shown John is on a very high mountain, indicating this elevation of spirit to perceive what God is going to do.

IV. As this great city is descending from God's abode we're struck, first of all, and John's view of the city would be kind of the same way you and I would view it.

We'd first of all see it in its total compass and then as it keeps coming clearer we'd begin to note its fine details, typical of anything that's coming into view.

The first thing that he presents to us is its skyline. Great cities have skylines. Verse 11 is his impression of this holy city. It shown with the glory of God and its brilliance was like that of very precious jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal. In antiquity the word "jasper" stood for an opaque precious stone. Probably here it suggests the concept of the word diamond." We're to think of John's first impression of the holy city as a gem that is brilliant and sparkling. A million-carat diamond coming down out of heaven that sparkles and that radiates with glory. First impression of such beauty. Again back to the picture of water. It's more than we can perceive because we've never seen anything like it.

John then begins to talk about its perimeter as it comes closer. The first thing he notes are the gates in the walls. He notes the walls first but his real intention is to get to the gates. He sees that each gate has an attending angel. My own view is the angel is not the doorkeeper because the doors are always open. The angel is the welcomer to the visitors that come. He's simply there positioned to give grace and dignity to the gates. Each of the gates are named for the twelve tribes of Israel signifying that this New Jerusalem comprises the people of God of the old covenant and the people of God of the new covenant. In heaven there is but one people of God from both ages—the Old Testament age and the New Testament age.

Further these gates are equally distributed on all four sides. Three on the east, three on the north, three on the south, and three on the west. William Barclay has a suggestion here. He tries to let each of the gates represent something. He says, "The eastern gates, for example. The east is the place of the dawn and the rising of the sun. These gates are for those who find Christ in the glad morning of their days, who in childhood find Jesus as their friend, and in youth find Him as their

pattern. Their hero and their Lord. The north gates remind us of the cold, the bitter wintry wind, the chill of life. These represent those who have come to Christ in difficult times or who have come to Christ through the exercise more of thought than of emotion. The southern gates represent the land that is warm where the wind is gentle and soft. These are those who come to Christ through emotion, whose hearts are moved, who don't wrestle intellectually but whose love runs over at the cross. The western gates are for those who come to Christ in the dying of the day, at the evening, at the setting of the sun."

I'm sure John didn't have this precisely in mind when he wrote this. But I think it is a beautiful symbol to show the fact that the gates are always open as long as it is day.

The foundations for the walls bear the names of the twelve apostles. John is telling us that the church is present with Israel in the New Jerusalem.

In verses 15–17 John points us to the magnitude of the New Jerusalem. This really begins to be a mind blower. The yardstick or the rod that is used to measure the city is of gold itself. The extravagance of the city is being shown just in a simple little detail. Nobody I know of has used a gold yardstick to lay out the length of a city.

John may be dealing more symbolically too in terms of the size of the city. He's trying to use terms that impress us with the incredible unthinkable proportions and dimensions of the city.

He's telling us, for example, that the city is a square and a cube. It is twelve thousand stadia on all sides. We lose something if we translate that into miles. It comes out to roughly fifteen thousand miles square or cubed. But John uses twelve thousand in keeping with the symbolic use of numbers in Revelation. Twelve is the number of solidarity and a thousand is the number of completion and perfection. Every inch that should be in the city is there. It's complete.

If we translate it into our terms we've got city that is roughly the size of the territory from San Diego to Seattle over to Minneapolis down to New Orleans and back to San Diego. That's roughly the area that is compassed just on a square by this city. Los Angeles itself is about 3000 square miles and is populated by roughly ten million people. This city on flat surface if we take the numbers literally would have 2.25 million square miles. And using the Los Angeles ratio of population could on one flat surface accommodate 7.5 billion people. That's not going up 1500 straight up. The city might be a cube like the Holy of Holies. Some think it might be a pyramid with a throne at the top.

We take this and we're staggered at the incredible dimensions that are involved for us. It is framed by a wall. The wall is more for decoration than anything else. The wall doesn't keep anybody out because the gates are always open. There's no need to keep anybody out. Like a beautiful house with a white picket fence so the glory of God, the New Jerusalem is framed by a wall. Again a symbolic number is used. Twelve times twelve—one hundred forty-four cubits thick, or some translations have "high."

The materials are again staggering to the imagination. The wall is made out of jasper. The city is made out of gold and the foundation of the walls are listed as being composed of twelve different beautiful stones. John is doing something theologically through the recitation of these stones.

The twelve stones that are listed correspond roughly to the twelve gems that were on the breastplate of the high priest. In that symbol what was being described was the people of God were always on the heart of God. The twelve stones also strikingly correspond to twelve stones that represent signs of the zodiac. Except John has the zodiac order in the exact opposite order of the astrological charts of his day. It's John's way of putting down astrology by saying when you really come to the truth of God you'll find that astrology has everything backwards.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21

The twelve stones also are a little bit hard to identify with exactness because of the many different species and the lack of a standard terminology in ancient times. But try to imagine the foundations looking something like this. Jasper, here, perhaps a translucent rock crystal that is green in texture. Sapphire, a deep blue stone with iron pyrite. Emerald, green. Sardonyx, a layered stone of red and white. Carnelian, blood red. Crystallite, yellow topaz or golden jasper. Beryl, green stone. Topaz, greenish yellow or gold. Jacinth, bluish purple, amethyst, purple quartz.

The overall picture is a city of brilliant gold surrounded by a wall of jasper and resting on twelve foundations adorned with precious gems of every color and hue. The city is magnificent beyond description.

John goes on with his catalogue of things. The gates are made out of single pearls. Ever heard of a pearl that huge? Pearl the only thing in the city, which represents something produced through pain and suffering. One person has said that once we ourselves were a grain of sand in the sight of Christ. But He took us into His protective covering and made something beautiful out of our life.

The street is pure gold. John notes exclusions in the new city. The temple is excluded. There's no need for second-hand knowledge of God. There's no need for an institution through which to worship God because God himself is present. Created lights are gone. God is the light and the Lamb is the lamp. The gates are never shut. John is using earthly language. He does not want to convey the idea that the kings of the earth coming into the gates are sinners and we're repeating earth's situation. He says the only ones who could enter are those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, suggesting to me that the kings of the earth represent the redeemed, which go in and out of the city. I imagine that since the New Jerusalem is set within the environment of

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21

the new heavens and the new earth the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place of the people of God. But since the gates are open we may in the new life have a great deal more travel into the galaxies of God's creation than we dream possible. That the wealth and treasures of the universe are brought into the treasury of the holy city, the New Jerusalem.

I can't help but think about why this is in the Scripture and what it's meant to say to us.

Closing Prayer

I think, Lord, of the chorus that says, "I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back." Here Lord in Your Word today we have seen this picture of beauty, this place which the Lord now himself prepares for us His people. We hear again the invitation that says to everyone who is thirsty for an eternal relationship with you, that You will give the water of life freely and without cost. Lord, all of the treasures that are in Your person are available to us upon the condition of our open heart to you. May there not be anyone here Lord whose only experience of heaven will be the hearing of this exposition of the gospel from Revelation 21. But may in reality each of us see and hear, feel, touch and taste for ourselves. We ask through Jesus Christ. Amen.