



Part 45 – The River, the Tree, and the Throne

Revelation 22:1-5

After seeing the church in her glorified completion, John is shown the new creation in which God's redeemed and glorified people will dwell. And like the vision of the church, this vision of the new creation is highly symbolic. It draws heavily from the vision of the prophet Ezekiel.

John is shown a river, a tree, and a throne. Each of these images plays a vital role in the eschatological vision of life in the age-to-come. Flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb is a river clear as crystal. In Ezekiel's vision, a river flows from the temple (47:10-12). The river itself harkens back to Eden – the first temple – from which a river flowed (Genesis 2:10). Being the source of a river demonstrates abundance and life. The tree of life spreads like a forest on both banks of the river. The vision is bracketed by mention of the throne of God and of the Lamb. The prominence of the Lord's throne reminds us of his proximity to his people. There will be no need for a temple, for the whole of the new creation will be the temple of the Lord's variegated glory just as the first creation was intended to be. Together, we will dwell in God's blessed presence along with all those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

The River

Vs. 1 – Here is portrayed God's earlier promise to give to the thirsty water from the spring of life without payment (21:6). This points not merely to the Lord giving us life-giving things, but to the fact that he gives us himself.¹ In his vision of the eschatological temple, Ezekiel depicts the river flowing into the Dead Sea and bringing it to life (Ezekiel 47:1-12). The brightness of the river (described as "clear as crystal") is meant to be understood as a reflection of the glory of God (21:11, 23).

In his gospel account, John records Jesus as comparing the indwelling Spirit to an inner spring of living water. Jesus invited all those who were thirsty to come to him and drink (John 7:37). To the one who drinks this water, the Lord said that "out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (7:38). To the Samaritan woman, Jesus made this offer directly: "...whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

The Tree

Vs. 2 – Once again, we see the rather common pattern of mixed metaphors. John moves from describing a garden to describing a city. This mixing of metaphors is intended, at least in part, to deepen our understanding of the vision. It may also be connected to the fact that such remarkable sights demand numerous metaphors. Main Street of the City/Garden is accompanied by a river that flows along with it. In the middle of this central avenue and on either side of the river grows the tree of life. In the first century, a river flowing through the middle of a typical Roman city would have been, in actuality, an open sewer. But the new creation offers a stunning contrast.

Notice that the tree of life grows through the middle of the street and on either side of the river. In Genesis we read of a single tree of life in the middle of the Garden (2:9-10). In Ezekiel's vision of the eschatological temple, he describes not a single tree but an entire grove or forest from which flows healing and life (Ezekiel 47:7, 12). In John's vision, it seems that both realities are in view. He describes "the tree of life" which harkens back to what was lost when our first parents were exiled from the Garden. But what he actually describes is an entire forest that flourishes right through the middle of Main Street and on both sides of the river of life.

"John's language suggests that he used 'Tree of Life' as a collective description of many trees, much like we do when we refer to a grove of oak or pine...John describes not a mere return to the garden and a Tree of Life. Instead, the one tree in the first garden has become a whole grove of trees in the escalated paradise of the second garden."²

¹ Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TCNT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 358

² Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then Now and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2025) p. 345

How appropriate that in the new creation God replaces the one tree of life that was lost with an entire forest which produces “twelves kinds of fruit” and is never out of season.

“In the original Eden, there was only one tree of life, and it was guarded after the fall by the cherubim with flaming swords. But in the New Eden, there are forests of trees of life on both sides of that river. This illustrates the principle in Romans 5:20, that ‘where sin abounded, there did grace much more abound.’ The generosity of God is hard for us to take in.”³

That the leaves are for “the healing of the nations,” is meant to indicate the permanent wholeness and health in the new paradise. The very next clause states, “No longer will there be anything accursed” (vs. 3). Sickness, decay and death are all part of the curse placed upon the earth in the wake of Adam and Eve’s sin. But in the new creation, that curse is done away with completely, so the leaves of the tree are not for healing sickness in heaven but are symbolic of the eternal healing granted there.

“In the holy city, God’s provision for his people is constant and endless. It was common to use leaves for healing in the ancient world; where the leaves of Ezekiel’s trees were for ‘healing,’ John once again expresses a more universal scope by adding ‘for the nations.’”⁴

The Throne

Vs. 3 – The vision is bracketed by mention of the throne in verse one and now in verse three. In verse one we see the river of living waters flowing directly from the throne (a reference to God’s blessed presence with his people). Now, in verse three John draws a contrast between what occurred due to the fall (mankind and all creation was cursed) and what will be the reality in the age to come (God will dwell in the midst of his people once again).

What will we experience in the new creation?

1. The multi-faceted and ever new blessings of God

How like God to replace the lost tree of life with a whole forest! The tree/forest of life depicted in John’s vision is filled with 12 different kinds of fruit (remember that the number 12 is symbolic of completeness!) and is always in season. It is a wonderful depiction of the abundant and varied blessings of God in the age to come.

2. God’s blessed presence

That we will see the Lord’s face (vs. 4) “underscores the unimaginable wonder and joy awaiting all who are members of the bride through faith in the Lamb.”⁵ God abiding with his people is the consummation of redemptive history and THE great blessing at the center of the new Eden.

“The center of the new world is God himself and the Lamb. Their rule and control, symbolized by the throne, produce the beauty and blessing of the new world. An abundant supply of life-giving water comes from God.”⁶

3. A renewed status as God’s vice regents

Vs. 5 – “...and they will reign with him forever and ever.” The new creation will not be boring! The original status given to mankind will be renewed. The redeemed will be God’s fully active vice regents just as were our first parents in the first garden.

“Revelation is designed not only to assure us of God’s final purposes, but also to increase our longing for him and the realization of his purpose. The sureness of that final bliss comforts the saints during times of temptation and persecution. It purifies our desires by directing them to God and his glory. And then the tawdry counterfeits of this world are seen to be what they are. We have eyes to see the beauties and joys of his creation as pointers to God and his goodness rather than foolishly perverting created things into idols (Romans 1:18-23).”⁷

³ Douglas Kelly, *Revelation* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012) p. 422

⁴ Ibid, p. 359

⁵ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 322

⁶ Vern Poythress, *The Returning King* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000) p. 192

⁷ Ibid. 192