

All Things New
Revelation 21-22
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We don't talk a lot about heaven anymore. We don't sing about heaven as much as we used to or as much as our ancestors did. Somewhere along the line the church got intimidated by the world's criticism that we were just interested in "pie in the sky by and by." That we were ignoring this world and its needs while we looked forward to the next world. So we worked hard to show that we really do care about this world. And we began downplaying the future world.

But that's really a false distinction. C. S. Lewis points out that through history the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought the most of the next. "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither" (*Mere Christianity* 118).

When we think about heaven or the afterlife, we're usually thinking about what happens and where we go right after we die. The New Testament teaches that believers, those who are in Christ, go to be with Christ immediately when they die. But there's even more. Our time in God's presence after we die is still part of a journey. God promises something beyond that—"life *after* life after death" (as N. T. Wright puts it). And what God has in store for us is not just spiritual, some ethereal life. It's the redemption and renewal of all creation, including physical reality through resurrection and new creation.

We started this series saying that Revelation shows us "hope for hard times." Those Christians in the late first century who were being persecuted and oppressed found great hope in this vision. All through history, Christians who have struggled, who have been persecuted and oppressed, have found great hope in this vision. We can find great hope in this vision as well.

Now, let's look at the vision of the life God has for his people. First, it's *new*. John sees a new heaven and a new earth. All the reality that God

originally created will be renewed. In v. 5 God says, "I am making everything new." The new creation that began with the incarnation of Jesus and continues by his Spirit in his people ("whoever is in Christ is a new creation" 2 Cor. 5:17) will be fulfilled and completed when God's kingdom is fully realized.

The new creation is a place of *perfect goodness*: "The Holy City." Think of the best people you know. They're probably also the happiest people you know. In the new creation, everyone will be like that times infinity. The goodness of the best people we know here is just a glimmer of the goodness and holiness that fill eternity in God's presence.

Notice that this Holy City, the New Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God. We usually talk about going up to heaven. It's more accurate to say that heaven comes down to us. God will renew this earth and the universe. The heavenly dimension that we can't see or experience now except through faith will be fully revealed and open for us to experience and enjoy directly. Also notice that it comes from God. We don't climb our way up to it, it's a gift.

The new creation is a place of *perfect beauty*. "Prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." In v. 9, the New Jerusalem is called the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

What will it be to see Jesus' face as he looks at his people, his church, his beautiful bride coming to be with him forever? We are that bride. That's how Jesus sees us and that's how he will see us in heaven. The bride is beautiful because she reflects the beauty and glory of God. We don't often think of God as beautiful, but what else could God be? God is the source, the Creator, of all beauty and it reflects his own beauty. Michael Card writes about this:

His relentless movement toward us, his romantic reaching out in Christ, embodies a beauty that is beyond words. Our God is beautiful in all his ways; it is a part of his perfection. This divine beauty has been woven into the fabric of creation, in the massive stars, inside the microscopic balance of the atom. Though we will only ever grasp his beauty in the most finite and rudimentary way, as creatures before a

Creator, still it can be enough to incite an unconscious but uncontrollable desire to respond, to make our own personal world beautiful in its own way, to worship. Creative worship is one appropriate response to the heartbreaking beauty of God. The beauty of his presence can be recognized, reflected in the beauty of our songs and dances. It can be seen in the fabric of our daily lives. A thousand examples speak of a deep, inner hunger for beauty that, at its heart, is a hunger for God. We hunger for beauty because it is a beautiful God whom we serve. (*Scribbling in the Sand* 32)

The new creation is also a place of *perfect fellowship and love*. It's described as a city, a community. The dwelling, the tabernacle, the home of God is with his peoples and he will live with them. God's covenant is fulfilled there and then. This city is a family. The ideal of perfect community, that the curse of sin prevents in the first creation, will be embodied in the redeemed from all nations (Robert Mounce *New International Commentary on the New Testament*).

This description of the new creation is filled with relational language. God's relationship with his people will be fully realized. Our relationships with God and each other will be experienced unhindered and totally fulfilled. Though we see now as in a dim mirror, then we will see face-to-face. Though now we know only in part, then we shall know as God knows us fully now (1 Cor. 13:12). In heaven there's no heartbreak from broken, flawed relationships. Instead, there's perfect love and fellowship.

There will be no tears, no death, no mourning, no crying, no pain. God will wipe away the tears from every weeping eye. The tears of suffering, of regret, of sorrow will be no more. The old order of suffering and death will be gone and we will live in the new creation of God's glory.

The new creation is a place of *ultimate fulfillment*. God says, "It is done" (v. 6). God's purposes will all be accomplished. Creation will be restored to what God intended in the beginning—perhaps even better. I believe that the new creation will be better than the paradise of Eden. It'll be the fulfillment of what God intended in Eden, but amplified through the redemption of Jesus and the long process of re-creation by God's Spirit.

Not only will God's purposes be fulfilled, but we'll find ultimate fulfillment. We'll drink freely from the spring of the water of life. We've begun to taste from its far-flowing streams now. Then we'll drink from the source, the fountain itself. We'll be overcomers then. Those who remain faithful through trials here will be victorious and will inherit all this. We'll be children of God in a fuller and greater way than we can now imagine.

In 21:9-27, John's vision shifts and the new creation is depicted in another way. The Holy City is described in symbolic detail. The glory and splendor of God's dwelling with his people shine in this description. The city is called "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." The church is the bride of Christ. All of God's people together comprise the bride. The city has twelve gates with the names of Israel's tribes and twelve foundations with the names of Jesus' apostles. Those symbols tell us that the city is a picture of the people of God.

The dimensions of the city are also symbolic. It's 12,000 stadia in length, width, and height. Again, twelve is a number that represents the people of God and completeness. Multiplying twelve by itself intensifies the sense of completeness. Multiplying it by 1000 expresses fullness. The city that's the center of the new creation is a symbol, a picture of all of God's redeemed people. That the city is a cube recalls the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. That sacred place was cubic as well. In the New Jerusalem, there is no temple. God and the Lamb are its temple and its light. The presence and glory of God indwell God's people and live in our midst. The vision here draws on Ezekiel's vision of a perfect temple. In Ezekiel, the area of the temple is about 1.5 miles. Here, in Revelation, it's about 1500 miles (that's what 12,000 stadia roughly equal). John's vision sees the Holy City as 1000 times bigger than Ezekiel's vision. The prophecies of the old covenant are fulfilled and exceeded.

In chapter 22, the vision focuses on one feature of the new creation—the river of life. This represents the ever-flowing grace of God, the life that God gives to his people in salvation. It's clear, bright and pure. It flows from the throne of God and the Lamb—the reign and rule of God are the source of this life. It runs through the community of God's renewed people. Along the river grows the tree of life, which humans forfeited in Eden. Now it's

freely accessible. It bears fruit every month. Its leaves bring healing. The curse of sin that Jesus reversed is now completely gone.

God rules. His reign is full and complete. God's people worship and serve, see and reflect God. God, who could not be seen, will be seen by his loving people.

Eugene Peterson translates v. 4, "His servants will offer God service—worshiping, they'll look on his face, their foreheads mirroring God."

Aaron and his descendants, Israel's high priests, wore on the forehead a golden plate inscribed "HOLY TO YHWH." The faces of those who experience this blessed vision of God will reflect the unmistakable likeness of our heavenly Father. The process of transformation now under way in believers (2 Cor. 3:18) will be completed when we enter this ultimate and ideal state (Mounce).

C. S. Lewis said that Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, duties and rules, guilt and virtue. But it leads us on, out of all that, into something beyond.

One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Everyone there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes. (*Mere Christianity* 130-31)

The Lord himself will be our light and we will reign with him forever. Who knows all that that means? But it won't be boring. We'll finally have come to the place where we're truly ourselves and we'll know God as he really is. We'll be able to offer to God the service he deserves and that we long to give. We'll realize fully what we're made for. And God's glory will pour upon us, in us, through us, between us in whatever activity will occupy us then, in whatever serving God will mean.

Near the end of Revelation is an invitation: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is

thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (22:17).

How can we get to that wonderful time and place? How can we begin to experience new creation now, so we'll enter into it fully then? Come and receive the gift of salvation God offers. In that act of receiving, we admit that we need what only God can give—forgiveness, freedom, new life now and forever.

Some Help in Exploring the Book of Revelation

The kind of writing Revelation is: Apocalypse—Prophecy—Letter

Author: A Christian named John in the late 1st Century A.D. (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8)—traditionally seen as the apostle John, son of Zebedee, though that's debated

Written around A.D. 95

Outline (from *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*)

Introduction: The Historical Setting (chs 1-3)

- 1:1-8 Prologue
- 1:9-3:22 The Historical Setting (including vision of glorious Christ and letters to seven churches)

Introductory Visions: The Scene in Heaven and on Earth (4:1-8:5)

- 4:1-5:14 A Vision of the Heavenly Throne
- 6:1-8:5 The Opening of the Seven Seals

Preliminary (Temporal) Judgments on the Empire (8:6-11:19)

- 8:6-9:21 The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets
- 10:1-11:19 The Two Interlude Visions

Conflict Between the Church and the Evil Powers (12:1-14:20)

- 12:1-7 War in Heaven and Its Aftermath
- 13:1-8 The Beasts Out of the Sea and the Earth
- 14:1-20 Outcome of the Holy War: Vindication and Judgment

The Seven Bowls: God's Judgment Against "Babylon" (15:1-16:21)

- 15:1-8 The Prelude
- 16:1-21 Babylon is Judged

Wrap-Up: The (Original) Tale of Two Cities (17:1:22:21)

17:1-19:10 God Judges the Harlot for Economic Oppression

19:11-20:15 The Last Battle

21:1-22:11 The New Jerusalem: The Bride of the Lamb

22:12-21 Epilogue: Encouragement and Invitation

2 Principles to Keep in Mind for Interpreting Revelation

“Lean is better than luxurious” (Earl Palmer, *Word Communicator’s Commentary*)

“No one should approach the Revelation without a proper degree of humility” (Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*)

3 Views of the Millennium (Latin *mille*, “thousand” and *annus*, “year”—see Rev. 20:1-7)

Premillennialism—After Christ’s return, his kingdom will be a literal, visible reign of peace and righteousness on earth in space-time history. After the final resurrection, last judgment, and renewal of the heavens and the earth, this future earthly kingdom will merge into the eternal kingdom and the Lord will reign forever on the new earth. There are various types of premillennialism that emphasize somewhat different views of the last things. “Historic Premillennialism” sees the church remaining in the world through the final tribulation leading up to Jesus’ return when he sets up the millennial kingdom. “Dispensational Premillennialism” sees the church being removed from the world in the “rapture” just prior to the Tribulation. Seven years later, Jesus returns to defeat evil and set up the kingdom.

Postmillennialism—The world will eventually be Christianized, resulting in a long period of peace and prosperity called the millennium. This future period will close with Christ’s second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the eternal state. This view was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. It became less prominent after the two world wars in the 20th century.

Amillennialism, or “Realized Millennium”—The millennium is the present reign of deceased believers with Christ in heaven and the rule of Christ in the Church. The present form of God’s kingdom will be followed by Christ’s return, the general resurrection, the final judgment, and Christ’s continuing reign over the perfect kingdom on the new earth in the eternal state. Beginning in about the 5th Century, this was the prominent view in the Church through the time of the Reformation (16th Century) and is still held by many today.

Some hold to *pro-millennialism*: if there is a millennium, I’m for it!

Others hold to *pan-millennialism*: it’ll all pan out in the end!

4 Major Ways Revelation Has Been Interpreted

Preterist—comes from a word that means “past.” Sees Revelation almost entirely in terms of the 1st Century A.D. setting in which John and the seven churches lived; may include reference to the fall of Rome in the 5th Century.

Historicist—sees Revelation’s prophecies unfolding throughout history, up to and including the present time.

Futurist—sees Revelation revealing events that were not only future for John but are also still future for us.

Idealist—sees Revelation as a dramatic, poetic description of the ongoing conflict between God and evil, but with God ultimately winning the victory.

Each of these views has something to commend it, so some combination of them helps us get closer to the intended meaning.

Why Did John Write Revelation Like He Did?

This question came up in a youth group one time. Why couldn’t John just say what he meant in a straightforward way? He certainly could have written that way. Some portions of Scripture do this—there are laws and history in the Bible that give straightforward commands and facts. Some parts of Scripture instruct, addressing our intellect. Some parts call for decision, addressing our will. Some—like Revelation, other prophecies, poetry, and parables—address and inspire our *imagination*.

One answer is that John wrote as he did because that’s how the Word came to him. God gave him this vision, showing him gospel reality in a prophetic visionary experience. Also, apparently, God inspired John to use the style of apocalyptic literature that was popular at the time and that often spoke to and for those who were suffering oppression, or were threatened by it, as John’s readers were.

Thinking about the kinds of literature available to us today, what if all we had to read were instruction manuals, technical reference books, etc.? Or, what if we only had history books or science books or law or biography? Some people would be content, and we could get by. But what if there was no poetry? What if we could read no imaginative works at all? Many of us would despair and we would all be poorer, less complete. What if the Bible included only one kind of writing, only one style that appeals to only one way of perceiving? We might get by, but we would miss out on a lot.

Some books for further study

Robert Clouse, editor, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1977). Four authors each present their understanding of the millennium and the other three writers respond from their perspectives. An older book, but it offers a good overview.

Robert Clouse, Robert Hosack, and Richard Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* (Baker Books, 1999). A somewhat lighthearted introduction to and overview of various ways people have understood Revelation and the end times.

Kenneth Gentry, Sam Hamstra, Jr., Marvin Pate, Robert Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Zondervan, 1998). Each writer presents his own view of how best to interpret Revelation.

Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Eerdmans, 2001). A scholarly, but accessible, overview of Revelation.

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1st edition, 1956; available in many editions). The final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Presents themes from Christian thinking about the last things in an imaginative way.

Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Abingdon, 1993). A basic guide to interpreting Revelation's symbolism. This is probably the book to start with if you haven't read much about Revelation.

Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (HarperCollins, 1988). Peterson approaches Revelation from a pastoral perspective, looking at how it communicates to us and helps us grow spiritually and live as disciples of Jesus.

N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2011). A very basic and understandable commentary. Part of Wright's series *The New Testament for Everyone*.

N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008). A survey of these biblical themes by a premier New Testament scholar.