

## A Place Called Home

Revelation 21:1–22:5

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As we have seen, the Book of Revelation is been about the triumph of God over the forces of evil. Every foe has been vanquished. Every opposition to the purposes of God has been rendered obsolete. Jesus is Lord!

This chapter continues that theme with a vision of the New Jerusalem given by "he who was seated on the throne" (21:5). The one who speaks identifies himself as the "Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End" (21:6; 22:13). Since history is *His story*, since he holds the beginning and end of things, it is interesting that John repeats at the close of the Book of Revelation what he has said of Jesus at the very beginning: I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the End" (21:6; cf. 1:8, 17). To paraphrase some words of Abraham Kuyper: there isn't a square inch of this universe over which Christ does not say, "Mine!"

The chapter opens with a breathtaking description of the new Jerusalem. The beast, false prophet and Satan himself have been cast into the lake of fire, along with death and the grave (19:20; 20:10, 14). All that was (and is!) destructive of the present existence is removed from the picture. But what of the earth itself? Does Revelation envision life to continue much as it has done, now that all opposition has gone? The answer to this question is an emphatic, "no!" s though the full picture requires us to glance at other New Testament passages.

Just as the cosmos shared in the results of Adam's fall s "the creation was subjected to frustration," Paul says (Rom. 8:20) s , so, too, the cosmos waits to secure the fullness of Christ's redemptive accomplishment. The effects of the fall are reversed by Jesus Christ. Paul envisions creation standing on "tiptoe" (as J. B. Phillips put it), stretching out its neck to catch a glimpse of the new mode of existence without the effects of sin (Rom 8:19). This "eager expectation" (the NIV rendition) is for liberation from its present bondage (Rom. 8:21). Peter even suggests *how* this will come about: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Pet. 3:10-11). The cosmos itself will experience a "regeneration" (Matt 19:28 kjv), or "restoration" (Acts 3:21).

"I am making everything new!" (Rev. 21:5).

Behind these great visions lie some words of Isaiah:

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create... 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... 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... (Isa. 65:17-25).

The new heaven and new earth will be "the home of righteousness" (2 Pet.3:13). That is why the Book of Revelation pictures the new heavens and earth as a magnificent cosmos in which all that was ruined in the old is repaired and beautified in the new. It is Paradise restored (21:4-5). There will be access to the Tree of Life (22:2); there will be no more curse or death (21:4; 22:3); covenant fellowship with God will be unclouded (21:3); and the River of Life will sustain (22:1). Best of all, the new heaven and earth will provide the Lord's people with a vision of the Lamb unparalleled in its beauty (22:3), and unhindered by tears (7:17; 21:4).

Some interpreters of this passage (and others like it, e.g. 2 Peter 3:10-13) have suggested that the present world order will be utterly destroyed (annihilated) to make way for the new heavens and new earth. Peter's use of fire, "the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (2 Pet. 3:12), might seem to suggest this. But, others have been insistent that this is not what the New Testament envisions. The word 'new' in "*new* heaven and *new* earth" both here in Revelation 21:1 and 2 Peter 3:13 is not *neos* but *kainos*. *Neos* suggests new in time or origin whereas *kainos* means new in nature or quality. Satan will not have the satisfaction of seeing God destroy His creation. God will instead transform it into so that it may reflect its intended glory and magnificence.

This will be heaven on earth! Here, "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). It is important to remember that the vision of heaven depicted in the Bible is, in the end, an earthly one, "the meek... will inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5; cf. Psa. 37:11). We must disabuse ourselves of notions of clouds and harps and wings, for a more tangible existence, one which bears a striking resemblance to many of the features of life we have already come to know. As C. S. Lewis said:

There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of "Heaven" ridiculous by saying they do not want "to spend eternity playing harps." The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them. All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible... People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs.

It is not completely the same, of course. The eradication of sin will have consequences that make it difficult for us to fully imagine what perfection will be like.

Among the more intriguing aspects of the new earth which hint at differences is the phrase in verse 1 that the new earth will have no sea. The sea is not man's natural habitat. He cannot survive in it without artificial means of support. For a land dwelling people as the Jews were, the sea had always posed a threat. Death is pictured in the Old Testament as drowning (Pss. 42:7; 69:1; Jonah 2:3). Consequently, in the Old Testament, the sea becomes synonymous with threat and hostility. Strange as the idea of an ocean-less earth is, the consequences are greater still, of course. It means, for one, that all marine life will be absent. This raises other issues as to the nature of the new creation in relation to biological life in general, but it is doubtful if this kind of literalism is meant here. We have already seen how Revelation has employed the "sea" in a metaphorical way to depict that which threatens to undo the harmony and peace of the universe (13:1; 17:15). It is the absence of this disturbance that is promised. The new earth may well have water on it, and lots of it!

It is into this tranquil existence that the *new* Jerusalem descends from heaven. She comes as a bride prepared for a wedding (21:2). Isaiah again lies in the background, especially 51:1-10 and 62:1-2. Isaiah depicts a marriage scene in which Jerusalem is adorned in beauty for her husband:

"You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married.

As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you." (Isa. 62:3-5)

Chapter 19:7-8 has already made it clear that what is in view here is the marriage of the saints of God with Jesus Christ. The church's final resting place is in fellowship with Jesus Christ on earth, as a *new* earth. The union is described in terms of the closest possible ascription, one which the Bible has been repeating in every period of redemptive history, and now again in the closing chapters of the final book of the Bible: "They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). The effect of this covenantal bond of intimacy is to reassure the people of God that no harm can ever come to them, no ill disturb their serenity. It is the fulfillment of the redemptive purposes of God from the very beginning.

"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7).

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people'" (Jer. 31:33).

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

The "old order is passed away" and there is no cause for tears (21:4; cf. 7:17). It is as if God wipes away the tears from a child's face in much the same way that a mother might do. It speaks of tenderness and compassion. It is as though God is saying, "It's all over now; all the pain is gone!" Death which entered at Eden following the Fall is now banished.

### **The Inhabitants of the City**

John is particularly fond of using water as a symbol of life and sustenance. It is he who records Jesus as saying: "he who believes in Me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). Now he pictures the city in similar terms, promising: "To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life" (21:6). A similar picture follows in the next chapter:

"Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (22:17). The prophecy of Isaiah lies in the background: They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.

He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. (Isa. 49:10)

"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost." (Isa. 55:1)

The Isaiah passage just cited goes on to speak of the making of a new covenant after the pattern of the "faithful mercies shown to David" (Isa. 55:1-3; c.f. 2 Sam. 7:14). This is what John now means whenever he goes on to say: "He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be His God and he will be My son" (21:7). The fulfillment of the Mosaic covenant (21:3) is now followed by the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. A line of continuity from the Old to the New is

established in these closing pages of the Bible.

It is grace, and grace *alone*, that accounts for the presence of the Redeemed in the new Jerusalem. They partake "freely" of the waters of life. Nevertheless, grace operates through perseverance and not apart from it. It is the one who "overcomes" (21:7) who inherits the blessings of the covenant. It is language we have heard before:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (2:7); ...[he] will not be hurt at all by the second death (2:11); ... I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it (2:17); ... I will give authority over the nations (2:26); ... [he] will... be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels (3:5); ... I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God (3:12); ... I will give him the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father His throne (3:21).

John gives explicit labels to the kind of folk who overcome. Grace reigns through righteousness (Rom. 5:21). Those whom grace catches, grace transforms to Christ's image. Thus, "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" (21:8). "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful..." (21:27). "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (22:15). Paul says something similar elsewhere:

"Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

### **Adorned in Beauty**

There follows a description of the new Jerusalem that is, quite simply, breathtaking (20:9 - 21:4). There is, in particular, a description of the bride given in terms which highlight the parody given in the description of the whore in chapter 17. In language which reminds us of Peter's description in 1 Peter 2:4-7, John paints a picture of the bride in terms of precious stones and foundation stones. There follows a temple-like picture, where the glory of God is found, in the midst of a dazzling array of jewels. The stones are reminiscent of the priestly representation of the saints as he bore them on the ephod which he wore (21:18-19; c.f. Exod. 28:15-21), and the gold reminds us of Solomon's temple (21:18; 1 Kings 6:20-22).

The closing chapters of Ezekiel are, of course, essential to what John is describing in this chapter. The vision of the new Jerusalem is predominantly given in terms of its jasper-like hue (21:11, 18). God is the glory of the new city (c.f. 4:3).

High walls (21:12) ensure protection and security; twelve gates inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (21:12), and twelve foundations to the twelve walls of the city inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles (21:14) ensure a continuity and completeness of the Old and New Covenants. The church is "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The city is represented as a cube, possibly alluding to the shape of the Most Holy Place of the temple (1 Kings 6:20). In the new Jerusalem, the entire city is holy.

The proportions of the city are staggering. The city measures 12,000 *stadia* (a *stadion* is approximately 200 yards or 185 meters in every direction (21:16). Clearly, its symbolic nature is in the foreground. Multiples of twelve and ten are being used to describe a city of huge proportions, big enough to contain the redeemed of the Lord. Interestingly, the combined length of the four walls (4 x 12,000) is 144,000 *stadia*, a number of completeness which we have seen before (7:4-9). The walls are measured using a different unit: 144 cubits (a cubit is approximately 21.5 inches, or 0.55 meters; 21:17). This would make the walls approximately 216 feet high. This is hopelessly out of proportion to 12,000 *stadia*, which would be in effect over 2 million meters! Some have suggested that the cubit measurement refers to walls thickness, rather than its height, but architecturally, this too is problematic.

Clearly, as verse 17 suggests, there is accommodation taking place to "man's way of looking at things". The reality is beyond our ability to grasp. What we are meant to gather is the sheer wonder of it all.

### **The absence of a temple, the sun and the moon**

There is no physical temple structure in the new Jerusalem (21:22). There is no need for sacrifice since Christ's death alone is sufficient for the redemption of God's covenant people. This, of course, is in contrast to the closing chapters of Ezekiel where we are given an elaborate picture of the temple that is to characterize the new Jerusalem (Ezek. 40-43). John understands the fulfillment of these temple portraits in Ezekiel in a non-literal way: "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21:22). Jesus had said in the temple of his day: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

Further features of the new Jerusalem are curious: there is no sun or moon (22:23; cf. Isa 60:19). John is recalling a passage from Isaiah 60 in which a reference to "god" has been substituted by one to "the Lamb." Are we to think

that the new earth will have no luminaries in the sky? Probably not. John is trying to paint a picture in which Jesus dominates the horizon in every direction. The glory of the Lord is everywhere, providing light for the temple and the new city (c.f. Ezek 43:2,5).

The picture continues, describing open gates and tranquil existence. There is no night when evil lurks unseen. Nations are flocking to the city in fulfillment of prophecies which have spoken of the success of the covenant of grace. The nations are flocking to the presence of God, bringing their glory and honor into it (21:26). That which is glimpsed at Pentecost, when the "nations" gather in Jerusalem and are baptized by the Spirit (Acts 2:9-11) is now portrayed in all its astonishment: the redeemed of all nations are gathering to Jerusalem. The promise to Abraham, that he would be a father "of many nations" has been fulfilled (Gen. 17:4, 5, 6; 18:18). The leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations (22:2).

All the nations You have made will come and worship before You, O Lord; they will bring glory to Your name.(Psa. 86:9)

It is not a picture of something in a future millennial age, or an idealistic picture of what life following this one will be like. Its physical, earthly aspect is a reminder of a corporeal existence. Its symbolical development tells us that we know only a little of its true nature. One thing is sure: Jesus will be at the center of everything.

## **Summary**

Three features are elaborated upon by John as he describes to us the new kingdom that God is going to build.

First, the new city in which the people of God will live. As to its physical dimensions, this cube-shaped city with walls over 200 feet thick is meant to be impregnable. Its vast dimensions speak of security, As to its beauty, its gates are made of pearls (Imagine a pearl the size of a city gate!). As to its destiny: this city is destined to become a bride!

Second, the new temple in which they will meet. Throughout history, God has been drawing His people and binding them to Himself by a series of covenants. Once more the language (in 21:3) is covenantal. God intends to accomplish His purpose of a people who might respond to Him in worship and adoration. This has been God's intention from the beginning. In the new heaven and new earth the worship of God will be pure. There is no source of evil left. It is also international. The "nations" will walk there (21:24, 26). And there is no temple there, because everything is temple.

Third, the new world which God will create for His glory. Everything is "new."

Nothing threatens, there is no curse (21:23). The Lamb has borne the covenant curse: to the Lamb, the Aaronic benediction had become an anathema: "the Lord curse you and forsake you; the Lord make His face to frown upon you and condemn you; the Lord turn His face away from you and give you grief" (cf. Numb. 6:24-26). There are no tears in this world because the Son has borne them on behalf of His people.

The Bible has come full circle. The Tree of Life appears once more (22:2; cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:22). The wilderness is transformed into a garden.

But it is not the garden that is the focus of attention. It is the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ (22:5).

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face  
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace;  
Not at the crown He gifteth, but on His pierced hand:

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