

November 22, 2009

Revelation: A New Heaven and Earth

Purpose: To help us celebrate the hope we have in Jesus Christ

Key Bible reference: Revelation 21.1-22.5

Key Verse: Revelation 21.1

Biblical Interpretation

One Sunday a five-year-old boy was in worship with his parents. The pastor was paraphrasing God's response to Job. In a big booming voice he said, "Where were you when I created the stars? Where were you when I created the sea and gave it boundaries? Where were you when I commanded the sun to rise? Where were you when I created lions and mountain goats and gave might to horses?" The lad had been drawn into the message and could see through his imagination what the pastor was describing. He held back a response to the questions just as long as he could. Suddenly, he said in a loud voice, "I wasn't there; but thanks anyway, God!"

I feel like that child as we move into Chapter 21 of Revelation. The description of the new heaven and new earth touches every fiber of my being. I want to call out, "It hasn't come yet; but thanks anyway, God, for the assurance that it is to be!" Chapters 21 and 22 provide a magnificent climax for Revelation and for the Bible.

Revelation 21:1. The new heaven and the new earth have come. The word new here does not mean simply another earth and heaven but a new kind of heaven and a new kind of earth that are radically different from the old. This concept is developed in the verses that follow.

The first earth and the first heaven have passed away, and the sea is no more. In the time of John the sea was regarded as a symbol of

turbulence and as the enemy of humankind. The Egyptians saw it as the power that swallowed up the waters of the Nile and left their fields without crops. In several places in the Bible the sea symbolizes power that God alone can control (see Psalm 89:9; Isaiah 57:20). In addition, there was the human element: Most people feared the sea. Navigational equipment was limited at best. The sea held power and mystery that caused people to see it as evil. Having the sea no more would be welcomed.

Verse 2. Here we see that "the holy city," "the new Jerusalem," comes "down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." This image embodies the longheld dream of the Jews for the restoration of Jerusalem, the Holy City. Old Testament references to the restoration are many (see Isaiah 60:10-14; Ezekiel 48:30-35).

An element of the philosophical thought of Plato is also present in this imagery. His doctrine of ideas or forms held that in the invisible world there existed the perfect form or idea of everything on earth and that all things on earth were imperfect copies of heavenly realities. If this be so, there is in existence the heavenly Jerusalem of which the earthly Jerusalem is an imperfect copy. The writer of Hebrews apparently thought in these terms: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). The "new Jerusalem," then, is the

heavenly Jerusalem, the perfect form, that comes from God to replace the imperfect form. She is beautiful beyond description, "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).

Verses 3-4. The covenant God made with Israel is reflected in these verses: "I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Leviticus 26:11-12). We hear the same covenant words in Revelation 21:3: "The home of God is among mortals./He will dwell with them;/they will be his peoples."

The New Jerusalem is the promise of having fellowship with God and receiving the love that comes from being at home with God. Tears, grief, death, crying, and pain are gone; for they are a part of the old order. Think about the vast number of people who have found great comfort and hope in these words. What do these verses mean to you? What difference do they make in the everyday activities of living?

Verse 5. For only the second time in the Book of Revelation (see 1:8), God speaks. God is the one who is making all things new. Again we are back among the dreams of the prophet. Isaiah heard God say, "I am about to do a new thing;/now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (43:19).

Paul, too, captured this dream in words: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God, the Creator, is now recreating. Although these words primarily refer to the final renewing, use of the present tense indicates that God is continually making things new. God speaks again, asking that these words be written; for they "are trustworthy and true" (Revelation 21:5). When something is written, it can be

shared from person to person and from generation to generation. What is trustworthy, what is true, must be recorded, remembered, and relied upon.

Verse 6. Again God speaks: "It is done!" In the mind of the believer, all that God has promised is on the way now to complete fulfillment. No loose ends remain to be tied up; the final victory, the New Jerusalem, is to be. To reinforce this point, God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

A promise is given to all who thirst: "I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." This statement immediately brings to mind the words of Jesus to the woman at Jacob's well: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14b). Notice the use of the word give in both verses. Spiritual water cannot be bought; it needs only to be received, for it is a free gift from God and Christ. If spiritual water is a free gift, why are there so many spiritually thirsty people?

Verse 7. The New Jerusalem is not for everyone; it is only for those who are faithful and loyal to God, for those who have not been seduced to follow other gods but who in all circumstances give their allegiance to God. They are the ones who will receive the inheritance of God. The verse continues with the covenant words, "I will be their God and they will be my children." It is interesting that the word "children" is used. If you are someone's child, you belong to that person and the person belongs to you. You are a family, and families share resources with one another. This understanding adds additional meaning to the use of the word inherit in the verse. What a beautiful image to describe relationships in the New Jerusalem! God is in a

covenant relationship with his children, sharing the family resources.

Human beings want love more than they want anything else. Many of our activities are designed to gain the love we feel we do not get. Yet in the greater scheme of things, love is a free gift of the gracious God who made us and continues to care for us. The vision of the last days is that there will no longer be any need to solicit love. The need will be satisfied before it is even recognized.

Verse 22. In verses 9-21, John describes the New Jerusalem. The description is awesome, and John apparently wanted it that way so that in our minds we might be carried into the wonder of all that God is doing for his people. When we get to verse 22, John turns his attention to aspects of life within the New Jerusalem. Immediately, John describes a unique feature of this incredible city: There is no temple, for in essence the whole city is the temple. In verse 16, an angel measures the city: "Its length and width and height are equal." In other words, it is a perfect cube. This feature has great meaning, for in Solomon's Temple the Holy of Holies was a perfect cube (1 Kings 6:20). The symbolism John is attempting to convey is that all of the holy city is the Holy of Holies, the home of God. No temple is needed, for the whole city is filled with the presence of God.

Verse 23. The city has no need for light; God is the light. Everyone and everywhere is illuminated by God's glory. This concept has Old Testament roots as well. In Isaiah we read, "The sun shall no longer be your light by day,/nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night;/but the Lord will be your everlasting light" (60:19).

We can also testify to God being light to us now. Many times in the "dark night of the soul" and in the joys of life, God's light has given new life to us. God's light is visible in creation. A colleague of mine has just become a grandmother for the first time. When she brought the picture of "the most beautiful grandchild in the world" for me to see, we both marveled at God's creation revealed in little ones. God's light is on earth where love, justice, and mercy are found.

Verse 24. In John's day this passage would be quite difficult for some people to accept, just as it is for many people today. The holy city is God's plan for all of humankind—not one nation or one ethnic group. It is filled with God's light and was created by One whose nature is love. Therefore, all nations are invited to live in the holy city. How does our church reflect the nature of the holy city?

Verse 25. In the ancient world cities had walls around them for protection. To enter or leave the city, people passed through large gates. These gates were closed at night for the safety of all within the walls. John tells us that in the holy city the gates will never be shut, conveying the sense of perfect freedom of access and fellowship with God for all. Notice these comforting words: "And there will be no night there." The ancient peoples, like some persons today, were afraid of the dark. In the holy city the fear of darkness will no longer exist; God's light has removed it.

Verse 26. Have you ever been to an International Fair? At the college where I taught, we had a large number of students from countries other than the United States. To celebrate their presence and to get to know about the nations they represented, we held an International Fair each year for the community

and for the college. Each of the international students had a display from his or her country; they shared customs, music, and dance. All who attended felt a bonding with the students and learned much about other countries in the world family. In this verse we have a picture of an International Fair. People will bring to the holy city the glory and honor of all the nations. Visualize this scene—God's worldwide family with its rich diversity at home.

Verse 27. The chapter ends with an emphatic statement. Even though all people are invited to be inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, some will not be there. This is a choice given to people; this is not God's desire. Conditions have been given for participation in this great future; these requirements are clear and apply to all persons. Those who will not repent of the evil of their ways are barred from the city of God.

We often emphasize the love of God expressed through acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. However, another facet of God's love also needs to be understood—the freedom to make our own decisions. We are not puppets in God's hands. The God whose nature is love has created us with the capacity to grow into the likeness of God's nature (sanctification), but we can say no to this opportunity. If we do say no, then our choices create consequences. John tells us that nothing unclean will enter the holy city, only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. The choice is ours!