

Heaven is Not Just the Eternal Day Off

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[0 : 00] I've always wanted to say this, please turn to the last page of the Bible. Actually, second last and last. And the problem with these chapters is that it's a little like trying to explain what chocolate ice cream tastes like to a baby which is still in its mother's womb.

These things are just completely beyond our experience. And these chapters 21 and 22 go beyond history, beyond the judgment day, beyond the arrival of the new Jerusalem.

A picture of blessing and joy in the presence of God. And I think that's why God reveals in symbols. We're used to symbols now, aren't we? Because symbols, very important, they are not there to satisfy our curiosity, but to expand our heart and our imagination and our faith and our hope.

And symbols act as a bridge between the gap of our experience now and what God wants to show us. And the more brilliant the experience, the more important the symbols are in a way. And last week, you remember, we began into the new creation.

And the core reality is that God himself is there. And the great shock as we begin our passage at verse 9 is that the camera angle changes and that the focus, if I say this reverently, is not God.

[1 : 22] The focus is us, the people of God. So look at verse 9, please. The angel orders John, come, come, I'll show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.

Verse 10, somehow he's transported to a high mountain and he showed me the holy city coming down out of heaven from God. Now the bride, the wife of the lamb, is a common New Testament term for the church, the Christian church.

This is the church of the future, after the judgment day. It is an image of us with God for eternity. It's very important and helpful to us because if you look at the church today, not so good.

Full of weakness and corruption and sin. But God isn't finished with us yet. So here is God's vision of the future and it's not a technological perfection where we don't do any household chores and our robots do them for us.

It's not a reincarnation to a higher level on the social ladder. It's not a disembodied absorption into the infinite where we lose our individuality. It's not any utopia of our choosing.

[2 : 33] It is the bride of Christ. It is the church. It is the wife of the lamb, which is the same thing as the city of God, the new Jerusalem. Because the bride of Christ and the city of God are two pictures of the same thing.

Please stay with me here. This is difficult. It's difficult to say these two things. The trend among some Christian theologians today is to be overly sensitive about what we should call this afterlife. You know, some say we shouldn't call it heaven. We should call it the new heavens and the new earth or the new creation and the new world. And their right concern is to get away from the Greek idea that we somehow will be floating disembodied on clouds, playing spiritual harps with ghostly fingers.

And that's the Greek idea that the body is bad and we'll, of course, have new resurrection bodies. But last week we saw that when the end comes, heaven and earth come together and we'll be united forever.

So it doesn't really matter whether we call it heaven or the new heaven and the new earth or the new Jerusalem. The key to this passage is that the picture of us in the future is both a people and a place.

[3 : 51] When John mentions the bride, he means the city. And when he mentions the city, he means the bride. The bride picks up our eternal intimacy and closeness of communion and fellowship with God.

And the city picks up the fact that we are a community of redeemed humanity, not just clean and forgiven, not just washed, but positively holy, reflecting the glory of God.

This is us in the future. And there is an avalanche of Bible images tying together all the different threads of the Bible here. I understand some of the Bible studies found this a very lumpy passage because you can pull a thread and have great fun and value in chasing each of those threads through.

But there's only one dominant and leading image. And I wonder if you picked it up. It's the image of light. The glory of God shining.

Not just to us, but in us and through us. Radiance, luminosity, clarity, warmth. And the passage neatly breaks in half at verse 21.

[5 : 04] And the first half, verses 9 to 21, we get a tour of the city. The angel takes John and us on a tour of the city. And we see what the city is like, what it's built of.

And I've called this the city of light. Then from verse 22 onwards, we go inside the life of the city.

And we're told what the subjective experience of being there will be like.

And I've called that the light of the city. So the city of light and the light of the city. Let's have a look at just those two points together. So the city of light, verses 9 to 21.

Do you know Paris? Paris calls itself the city of light. So does Baltimore. And Buffalo. A whole range of others.

And I think it's not because they've got a fantastic electricity grid. Because sometimes it does go down. It's because that's where the intellectual enlightenment happens. The reason this is called the city of light is because there is the glory of God.

[6 : 12] There is the shining display of all of who God is. His love and his majesty and his glory. His holiness and grace. But the city is not just lit up at one point.

The whole city and every part of the city reflects its brilliance. Just look at verse 11 a bit more carefully with me. This is amazing. This is speaking about the city. It says the city having the glory of God.

We have the glory of God. It's like we wear it as clothing. It's not saying that God shines on us. It's saying we actually have clothing, which is the glory of God.

It's radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. The word radiance means we're a light source. It's used for stars.

In other words, it's not just that we see God and we reflect his glory, as wonderful as that will be.

That's true too. This is actually saying that somehow the glory of God is inside us and shining through us.

[7 : 21] We don't just mirror his light. We shine with the light of God. It's amazing. And just in case we missed the point that this is the Christian church, the angel quickly goes on to describe the basic structure of the city in terms of a combination of the Old Testament church and the New Testament church of God.

So there are these great big high walls, which usually stand for security and eternity. But they're a bit redundant in a way because all the enemies have been defeated.

But they're there. And there are 12 gates with 12 names, the 12 tribes of Israel, and 12 foundations with the 12 names of the apostles. The city is built together of the people of God.

And the city is described completely materialistically. We're not floating around with harps and clouds.

I don't know why harps. I don't know why harps get the mention. And the point is, as you read this, and as Martin read it, it's absolutely gorgeous. I mean, it's hard to describe the sheer beauty of the bride and the new creation.

[8 : 28] When God first made the world, you remember he created the world and he described it as good, good, and very good. This is different. This is better.

This is beautiful. Eternity is no odorless, tasteless, colorless void, as one commentator says. It's a city of light and color.

And I think that's the point of the jewels and the stones and the gold. You can arrange them and kind of identify them with other things in the Bible. But the point is, you can't get jasper or gold in this world that's so pure you can see through it.

It's transparent. And in that city, this is what the city is made of. It's made of us. But it's something of a commodity that people kill for today, gold.

So pure, so transparent, all we do is walk on it. And the angel doesn't want us to miss the shape of the city. So the angel comes out with a golden measuring rod.

[9 : 31] And we find the city is a cube, perfectly even sides. Again, this is describing spiritual reality in human terms.

Because the only other perfect cube in the Bible is the Holy of Holies, where God made his presence dwell. So the bride, the new city, is where the presence of God dwells. We are the Holy of Holies because God dwells with us in intimate, perfect, eternal communion. And I think this is particularly wonderful for those of us who are suffering or who are under great pressure or who face future suffering.

Because the measurements here represent God's specific, detailed and perfect care. In the Old Testament, when God's people were captive in exile and the temple and the Holy of Holies had been destroyed, God gave them a vision and told the angel to measure the new Holy of Holies. And now we find that every single one of God's promises have come true. And the people to whom this was written to faced terrible persecution. We read in history that some of the people to whom these letters went to had their heads sawn off.

[10 : 47] They were covered with tar and set alight. But God has the exact measure of his new city. And he is bringing us to that radiance, that material radiance.

And it's only the hope of that which is enough to sustain people in the first century and the 21st century, enabling us to forgive our enemies looking to the city without foundations.

See, there is room in that city for every single child of God. No one's going to be passed over. Not one of us will be accidentally missed out. Every centimetre is measured and known to God.

And the walls which stand for that inviolable fellowship with God mean that nothing can separate us forever and ever and ever. The God who says in the Old Testament that I catch all your tears in a bottle, then wipes them away.

And then he shines us and floods us with his light so that we become the city of light. It's a brilliant vision. Well then, what is it like to be there? Let's go inside the city.

[11 : 53] What is the experience like? And we move from the city of light to the light of the city from verse 22 onwards. And the heart of the experience comes to us in verse 4 of 22, that little phrase, they will see his face.

Four little words in the Greek. The light of the city comes from the immediate, direct and personal presence of God himself.

Now you remember in the Old Testament, this is what Moses longed for. Moses who'd grown up in the most wealthy palace of his day. Lord, show me, show me your glory. And the Lord said to him, you know, Moses, a human can't see my glory and live.

So he puts him in a cave, puts a hand over the cave and then passes by and proclaims his name, the Lord, the Lord of God, steadfast and compassionate. And in the New Testament, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, he shone from within, you remember, with all the glory of God. And the pureness and brightness and beauty of that light left all the disciples absolutely gobsmacked and tongue-tied. And later on in the New Testament, when Peter describes the experience, he says that outward display of glory was this perfect combination of majesty and grace.

[13 : 22] He says, It's called seeing his face because it is absolutely direct.

There will be nothing between us and God. Since Christ has made us holy, we will see his glory face to face. Just as you look at the face of a friend, I look at your faces now.

There will be nothing between us. God won't use any means. See, we get a vision of God's face now in the person of Jesus Christ through the gospel.

But we see through a glass, like in a mirror. We see the face of God reflected to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. But then there will be nothing between us. We will see him as he is.

God will give us new eyes, the eyes of the resurrection body, that will be capable of seeing him because our faith will be turned into sight. Jonathan Edwards was a terrific American theologian.

[14 : 44] He wrote a lot about the face of God. And he said, Seeing the face of God will be more immediate and more wonderful than seeing the face of a friend. Because when we're enjoying the fellowship and company of friends, we still don't really know what's in their soul, in their heart.

But God will shine his glory to us in such a way that we will know as we are known. He says we will be given a most clear sight of the spiritual nature of God himself. That's why there's no more need for sun or moon or temple.

Back at chapter 21, verse 22. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it its light and its lamp is the Lamb.

Now that doesn't mean there is no sun or moon or they cease to exist. We just don't know whether that happens. But if they're there, their light is infinitely inferior to the shining of God's glory. You see, God gives us the sun, not so that we look at it, but so that we see other things by the light of it. But in the new city with new resurrection eyes, we're not able to just see other things by the light of God.

[16:00] We're able to look into the light of the face of God itself. What will that be like? Well, it's like the difference between knowing and believing God is holy and standing in the presence of his holiness in delight and beauty and overwhelming love, as it really is.

And the images come thick and fast, drawing us into this light. Look at chapter 22, verse 1. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, there it is, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city, that street that's translucent gold.

Also on either side of the river, the tree of life, with its 12 kinds of fruit yielding its fruit each month. And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

So the tree of life comes straight out of the Garden of Eden, but this tree is different.

It's been radically transformed. Originally, the tree was just a symbol of eternal life, of life ongoingly. And we lost access to that tree because we turned away from God.

[17:18] We said to God, we don't need your tree. We're going to create a life of our own. We're not going to do what you say. I'm going to choose to do it my way because it's my right. And we rebelled against him.

And the result of that is death. And now every single human being faces death, since we cannot find the tree. This week I was driving home and on the radio came that Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song, which has a chorus, we are stardust and we got to get ourselves back to the garden. Yeah, all together now. I found out it's written by Janie Mitchell. It's interesting. And it's a dream of so many. We've got to get ourselves back to the garden, but it's absolutely and completely impossible.

Because what God is building, he's not rebuilding that original garden paradise. He's building a garden city, which is better, which includes a number of new things.

And what he's building it on is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Because in his death, Jesus took our death to himself, all our sorrow, all our sin, all evil, all darkness.

[18:32] And he took death in such a way as to give us a new life. Why am I saying this? Because the tree itself has changed. The word that John uses for tree here is not the normal word for tree.

It's the word for the cross. It's the word for the preaching of the cross in the book of Acts. In other words, the tree of life in the new city, the wood of the tree, is made from the cross of Christ.

Because now eternal life comes to us through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. That's what it means to be saved. And now we have a forest of the tree of life by the water of life bearing fruit all the time.

And the picture is of perpetual variety and refreshment, always new, always abundant. And we're told it is for the healing of the nations. But it's not for the healing of sin and evil and pain or lack. All those things have already been taken care of. They're gone. What this healing means is it takes what is perfect and makes it even better.

[19:42] It promotes a greater and greater enjoyment and pleasure in God and in his face. See, we have a static view of perfection. We have a Greek mathematical view of perfection that you reach a certain level and then everything after that is just a plateau.

That's not the Bible view. The biblical view of perfection is a dynamic view. So it means that we can be without sin and we can even be holy and pure but still growing in our capacities to know more and to love more and to enjoy more and to serve more.

Did not Jesus himself, was he not made perfect through suffering? And I think that's why the angel shows John the water of life and the tree of life together.

Because to see the face of God means to grow in our capacity of joy and happiness. God made us and he made us with this capacity for happiness and he knows what satisfies and fills us.

And all our enjoyment is based on the capacity of our souls and how much our souls can take in and absorb. And in the new Jerusalem, I take it, we grow in our capacity as we drink the water of life and eat the fruit, the flawless fruit, on goingly.

[21 : 01] There's nothing in life, there's nothing in this world that can do that. There is no pleasure, there is no joy in this world that is not mixed with disappointment and sadness. There's no sweetness in this world that's not mixed with bitterness.

The first American billionaire, John D. Rockefeller, was once asked, how much is enough? And he said, just a little bit more. I mean, every friendship, every relationship, no matter how close, is going to be ripped apart by death.

But to see the face of God is to be at the fountainhead of the supply of life and joy and delight and without end and unmixed with regret or guilt or sorrow or sin because there's no impurity in the city. Sin will be no more. The desire to sin will be no more. The desire to desire sin will be no more. And what will we be doing? Well, when I was a kid, I thought heaven was like a very long church service. Sorry. And church can be good but that would be a bit disappointing, wouldn't it really? We're given two little hints about what we're going to be doing in verse 3 and 5.

[22 : 18] In verse 3, we're told at the end of the verse, his servants will worship him. It's not the word worship. It's the word serve. It's a word used in the New Testament for things, normal Christian stuff, Christians do.

Present your body as a living sacrifice. That's your spiritual serving. So we serve him and then at the end of verse 5, we find out that we reign with him forever and ever. We reign forever and ever. We're not told what we reign over. And everyone who asked me this week, what are we going to reign over? I said, I'm going to reign over you. And then I said, no, no, you're going to reign over me.

But somehow, I think the point is that God is going to share his kingly rule with us. That in our serving, he involves us and elevates us into what he's doing and how he's doing it. Not so as we become little gods, but so as we enjoy and participate in the honour of serving and ruling with him together. And whatever it is, we'll be reflecting the glory to each other.

[23 : 24] We'll be stamped with his name. We'll be bearing his image. with all our individual differences, we'll be part of the revealing of God.

It's amazing. And, well, they're just three little things I perhaps could point out as we finish. The first is that every word of this section echoes something God's done or God's promised right from the first chapter of the Bible and throughout.

God made us for himself. We crave to see his face. That light. And God has carved a way through our disobedience and our death to purify us and to renew us and to bring us into his presence in such a way that we're not going to want to want to sin.

And that that final state is going to be infinitely better than the Garden of Eden was, as good as it was. God is faithful. He will do it. Secondly, the way God carved through our darkness, hardness, and death is through sending his only beloved son, the Lamb of God.

And every time, except twice, in this passage, God is mentioned. It's God and the Lamb. God and the Lamb. Seven times the Lamb. which means that Jesus Christ, crucified, remains central and pivotal to our life in glory forever and ever.

[24 : 57] The only qualification for entering into the city is being written in the Lamb's book of life. It's those who trust Jesus, specifically his death, on their behalf for our sins as we are about to enjoy together in the communion.

All rests on what we make of him. And finally, I want to say, I think it is a great kindness of God to tell us all this. Because we're future-oriented beings.

We are constitutionally made this way as humans. We lean toward the future and the future gives meaning to the present. A friend of mine used this illustration.

I really like it. He says, you have two people, two guys, doing exactly the same job making widgets. And one is promised \$30,000 at the end of the year and the other is promised \$30 million at the end of the year.

And even though they're doing exactly the same thing, everything has changed for one of those guys. He has a completely different attitude to work. The long hours and the difficulty, they're very bearable now.

[26 : 03] And even the meaning of the work changes because of the promise of the future. And these chapters are not about a big financial payout. But the promise is that we will see the face of God.

That we will be the city of light because God himself will be our light. And I think what that means for us now is that we should shine as lights in the world.

Let's kneel and pray. Amen.