

Heaven is Not Just the Eternal Day Off (Evening Service)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 March 2017

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Welcome everybody. It's great to see you. Special welcome to the Mioga family. Hello everybody. Fantastic to have you here. So you're jumping in right at the end of a series we're doing on Revelation. And so what I want to do for everybody here, but it's probably helpful if you're visiting with us or here for the first time, a bit of a flyover of Revelation so far.

So stay with me here. Okay, so you may have noticed in the book of Revelation that cities are quite a big deal. Cities are a big deal. Right at the start we had these seven short letters, if you remember, to seven churches and cities. And these churches were in tough situations. Some of them were facing persecution. Some of them were really complacent. Some of them were tempted to compromise.

And so that's the start of Revelation. And then in the middle of Revelation, it all goes a bit crazy. There's images of beasts and battles and horsemen and trumpets and bowls of wrath. And it's quite baffling stuff. And it's vision after vision after vision. And what it's attempting to do is it's trying to place the struggles of these little churches into a larger context. And the larger context is this great cosmic battle between good and evil. And so it's this war, a cosmic war.

And it's a war with a known outcome, but it's still a war. And evil is presented in a number of different ways and through the major middle chunk of Revelation. But one of the ways it's presented is it's a city, a city called Babylon. So the start of Revelation led us to people and cities. The middle evil is called a city, Babylon. And now we're at the end of Revelation and we're talking about another city. But this one is an amazing city. It's called the New Jerusalem. It's our future home.

I think the passage tries to make it fairly clear that we're supposed to see this future home in comparison to Babylon. And here's why I say this. In chapter 17, an angel says to John, and listen to these words, come, I will show you the judgment of the prostitute. And then it goes on to talk about Babylon, this symbolic prostitute, this symbolic city called Babylon. Here using exactly the same words, verse 9 of our passage, an angel comes to John and says, come, I will show you the bride.

[2 : 2 5] And then goes on to talk about the New Jerusalem, God's city. In both cases, it's got this, come, I will show you phrase. And the same pattern. The angel says, I'll show you a woman, and then shows John a city, a woman, then a city. And that's because cities are personified as a woman in the Bible. So it's slightly confusing. I know the whole woman city combination. I'll explain it one more time. So evil is described as a woman and a city. Heaven is described as a woman and a city. So the evil version, woman is a prostitute and the city is Babylon. The good version, woman is a bride and the city is the New Jerusalem. So back to my main point though, there's supposed to be comparison being made here. The prostitute and the bride, Babylon and the New Jerusalem. And the jewelry sort of imagery makes it fairly obvious, I think. Remember in chapter 17, the prostitute slash city has got jewels and pearls it talks about. She looks really good.

And it'd be very tempting to want to sort of be part of all that thing that's going on. But you scratch the surface and the beauty is about this thin deep and it's rotten underneath.

Because Babylon represents Rome. And Rome's beauty and wealth is built on the back of what? You know this is enslavement and injustice and violence and oppression and deception.

And in chapter 21, the bride that we just read about, the New Jerusalem, is also arrayed in jewels and pearls. But in this vision, the New Jerusalem is shot through with purity and lightness and goodness because it reflects the glory of God, the radiance of God. And Christ is at the center of it all.

So Revelation puts before us these two women. It puts before us these two cities. And it's saying, which of these two things are you going to let shape you?

[4 : 25] Which of these two things, which of these two cities are you going to put your hope in? So that's the preamble. That's just an introduction catching us all up to speed.

Now, let's crack on and get into some details. So we're in Revelation 21 to chapter 22, verse 5. And it's all about the hope of heaven.

And the passage, if you have it open in front of you, it's probably helpful. The passage sort of splits nicely right in half at verse 22. And the first half is all about the physical attributes.

A lot of describing physical stuff, physical attributes. And the second half is all about what life is going to be like in this new city. And here's something really important that I want you just to sort of lock away.

It's a bit of a rubric here. It's talking about both people and place, this passage. Both people and place. You remember the angel says, come and let me show you the bride.

[5 : 24] That's the church. That's the people of God. And then it shows the city. So it's talking about people and place. So when it's describing something, it's talking about us and the place.

Okay, let's crack on here. We're looking at the first half, the physical attributes of a city. What do we learn? And remember, this is apocalyptic language. It's symbolic language.

It's trying to convey something beyond itself. So in no particular order, first point of the first half of our passage, what is it trying to convey? First point. Here we go.

Here it is. Write this down. Heaven is stuff. People are stuff. Right, this is really good.

You're not right. He didn't write that down, which was weird. I know what you're thinking. That's, you know, have you had a hard week, Aaron? Is that the best you could come up with? Heaven is stuff.

[6 : 22] No, it's important. Like, when you're reading it, there are roads. There are trees. There's gates. Like, I know it seems really silly, but the point's got to be made, because the cliché version of heaven is that it's spirit people in robes, knee-deep in clouds, playing harps with ghostly fingers.

That's not what heaven will be like. Heaven is a physical place. We will be physical beings. One of the most, I'll say it like this, one of the most ancient heresies in the church, going back a very long time, is the ancient heresy of Gnosticism.

This is a Greek idea. It was the Greek idea that the physical, like the physical, the physical is bad, and only the spirit stuff is good. No, no, no, no. That's not what Christians believe.

We don't believe that. Christianity is actually one of the most materialistic of all faiths. And when I say materialistic, what I'm saying is it's the most earthly.

Like, the physical is okay. It's good. When Jesus returns, the earth will not be destroyed, and we will not become spirit beings. That is not the great hope of heaven.

[7 : 38] The great hope in heaven is not that we'll be divested of our bodies and live as these sort of genderless, cultureless spirits. No, we'll be redeemed spiritually, and we will be redeemed physically on a real, remade earth.

Christians living in clouds, that's uncreation. That's decreating things. That's the opposite of what Revelation is talking about.

That's not our hope. Heaven is stuff. It's made out of stuff, and it will be made out of stuff. It's solid. It's not ethereal. It's not wishy-washy. It's real hope.

It's something real. That's quite a general point. Let's look at more specific things here a bit more closely. Did you notice the gold streets? That sounds quite good, doesn't it?

What does that mean? You know, probably lots of things, and there are tons of theories.

[8 : 40] But I'm just going to go for at the very least what it could mean. At the very least, I'll say it like this. So gold is highly prized, right?

Right now. Gold is people, we like gold. We like it more than almost anything else in the world. And in fact, the whole monetary system up until recently, the whole monetary system of the planet was built around the value of gold.

People kill for gold. But in heaven, the most highly prized thing now is something we just sort of walk on. So in heaven, we won't have access to gold through digging and mining.

The place will be gold. Gold. That's how amazing it's going to be. The streets. Just the stuff, just the normal stuff. Gold. Now again, this is symbolic language.

I don't know if it's going to be literally gold, but it's trying to say, when you get there, you're not going to be disappointed. It's the same idea, I think, with all the jewels. They go into great detail about all these jewels and stuff.

[9 : 47] And there's a lot of theories about the jewels. One of the arguments, which is actually not a bad argument, I don't think. Some folks say that the jewels, the big high priest way, way, way back in the days, he used to wear this breastplate that was covered in jewels.

Twelve jewels, like the ones mentioned here. And each of these jewels represented one of the tribes of Israel. So perhaps it's a nod to that. But scholars do like to play a bit of Bible code with the jewels.

And I just don't know. I think the plain meaning of the text here is that it's, at the very least, again, trying to say that the city is flooded with beauty.

That we will be. And we will be beautiful. Beautiful. And do you notice where they put the jewels in this vision here? It's on the foundations. That's the part of the city you don't normally get to see, right?

It's normally the ugliest, the most inconspicuous part of the city. Hidden and concrete. Even that's going to be ridiculously gorgeous. Remember, this is talking about place and people.

[10 : 53] Beautiful. So we will be beautiful. Even the ugliest parts of us, even the parts of us in our life now which we sort of are embarrassed about, will be beautiful, will be redeemed.

What a wonderful hope. A wonderful hope, particularly if your life right now feels ugly or stressful or dark. Ah, it's going to be beautiful.

It's going to shine with the glory of God at some point. Remember again, symbols, not literal. So I don't want to sort of try and unpack it too much more.

John actually gives us a clue to sort of not sort of go, okay, there's going to be actually like a pearl 300 feet high as a gate. Because he says in the passage, it was like, and it was like.

It's probably going to be better than what he can convey here. What he's doing, he's ransacking all the most gorgeous things he can think of to try and explain to something which we can't wrap our heads around.

[11 : 54] It's like he's trying to, it'd be like us trying to explain to a newborn baby what love is or what a sunset is or what ice cream tastes like. Now why is heaven going to be so stunning?

Well, the clue is in the measurements. Did you see the measuring thing? That was odd, right? Wasn't that odd? The angel gets this golden measuring stick and he attempts, he sort of measures things out.

And because he doesn't want us to miss the shape of the city, the city's like a certain sort of shape. Turns out it's 12,000 stadia, which is about, it's a couple thousand K, maybe 1,500 miles across.

And you don't have to worry about what a stadia is. The key is though, verse 16, the length and width and height are equal. So heaven is what? It's a cube.

It's so interesting. Heaven's a cube. There is only one other cube in the Bible. And that's in the Old Testament, the center of the tabernacle. The center of the tabernacle, the inner sanctum, was a room called the Holy of Holies.

[13 : 00] And it was where God's glory especially dealt his raw presence. And what the Old Testament called the Shekinah glory of God was in this cube-shaped room. And the only person that was allowed to go into that room was the high priest.

The holiest, supposedly holiest, still totally sketchy, right? But supposedly holiest guy around in Israel, he would enter that room on the Day of Atonement.

And after spending days purifying himself, he would go back there and he had it on his robe. He had little tassels, these little golden bells on his tassels. So that people on the outside could listen and go, is he still moving?

Is he still moving? Because they're worried that he'd die in this room because of the glory of God. And they actually would tie a rope around his ankle in case he did keel over and they could just kind of drag him out. Oh man, it's very serious business, this whole thing we're talking about here.

So anyway, so heaven, the New Jerusalem, is described as a cube referencing the Holy of Holies. So those measurements are saying that this place that we are going to, which is our great hope, contains the raw, undiluted, pure presence of God.

[14 : 09] So in heaven, there's not just this special place that God is. God is present everywhere in this place. He will touch every part of heaven. And that's why it's so beautiful.

That's why it's so gorgeous. That's why it's indescribable. Because God is in every place there. Heaven will be unimaginably beautiful.

We will be unimaginably beautiful. Because God will radiate through us in this place. Right. Pause. I went on a vacation a while ago with Amy and the kids in extended family.

This is a few years back. And somebody let us use their vacation home. This was in North Carolina, a place I think it's called Hilton Head. And we walked into this house that we were borrowing.

And it was incredible. It was an incredible home. Right on the beach. House, beach, right there. Everything was perfect. Everything was very high end.

[15 : 12] And we walked in and looked down on the carpet. Carpet was pure white all the way through the house. And for about one second I thought, this is amazing. And then the very next second I thought, we are going to ruin it.

We will destroy this house within a few minutes. White carpet and a beach house. Who does that? As I describe heaven to you, I wonder if perhaps you're thinking, this sounds amazing.

I'm going to mess it up. Well, someone else is. You know, we've talked about this gold and this jewels and these dimensions. Now I want to talk about the wall.

Because the wall guarantees that it won't get messed up. Walls in ancient times marked out a city. And more importantly, they protected that city.

And this wall in Revelation is not only beautiful, it's made out of jasper. But it's also ridiculously tall all wide. I don't think it specifies this. It's 144 cubits, which is, that's a few hundred feet.

[16:16] That's a big wall. I know it's not great to talk about walls right now in the world. But anyway, this massive, massive, that will be a very effective wall. And it's trying to say that where we will be and who we will be will be eternally secure.

It won't get messed up. Okay, so what have we learned so far? I'm cutting that point a bit short there. But what have we learned so far? Heaven will be beautiful beyond our imagination. We will be redeemed and reflect the glory of God.

God will be there. It will be eternally secure. You don't have to worry about it going sideways like the Garden of Eden. That's the first half of the passage, mostly dealing with the physical attributes of the city and us.

This incredible community we're going to be part of. Now the second half of the passage, and very, very quickly, let's talk about verse 22 onwards, just for a couple of minutes here. Focus on what life will be like in heaven.

When describing something that's indescribable, sometimes the Bible uses a strategy. It's called via negativa, which means before telling you what something is, you say what it isn't.

[17:32] You might have noticed the passage. There's a chunk of it that's filled with a lot of no's. There won't be this. There won't be that. There won't be no temple. No shut gates. No sun.

No moon. No night. Let's look at just one of those no's. And I think it's the most shocking one, the really big one. There was no temple. There's going to be no temple in heaven.

Verse 22. Now, that doesn't sound that shocking to you, probably. However, for Jewish people reading this, that would have been unbelievable, because the temple was the center of life back then.

It was central because it mediated and facilitated people's access to God. So in Israel, you had this big temple. You had the outer courts. You had the courts of foreigners. You had the courts of women. You had the slightly inner courts.

And then you had the holy of holies, the inner sanctum. And to get from this court to sort of the inner one would require these sort of progressive levels of holiness and purifying. And like I said before, the middle bit was only actually accessible once a year by one guy.

[18:33] In the new Jerusalem, there's no temple. There is nothing to mediate our relationship with God or the presence of God, because nothing will separate you from God.

In verse 4, it says, we will see his face. We will see the face of God. And we will look into God's eyes, and we will experience nothing but love.

And we will feel no embarrassment. And we will feel no shame. And wouldn't that be wonderful?

We were made by God. We're his creation. And seeing God's face, we'll be doing what we were meant to do.

It will be the fulfillment of our greatest desire. That's going to be incredible. So there's a chunk there that talks about a whole lot of things that won't be in heaven.

[19:35] No temple. And after talking about a few other things, it talks about what will be there. And I'll just talk about one thing. Verse 22. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city.

Also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. So what do we learn here? Well, heaven is not a return to Eden.

It's not a return to this primeval utopia. We read here. What are we learning here? There is an urban center. It's an urban center in the midst of a created world.

It's a city and a garden. What else do we learn here? Second, this river. What's the river about? Well, river water back in the days was necessary for life. I mean, it's one of the reasons for the success of Rome is they had this really developed and elaborate complex of aqueducts.

Water is life. And this river running through the middle of the city is there to remind us or to tell us that everything that we will enjoy in this city, is because God is at the center of it.

[20 : 44] Because Christ is there. God and Christ. You always see it mentions the Father and the Lamb beside each other. All the blessings and furtherments and joy that we will experience there is because of the life of God.

Now, there is so much more to say about these passages. Like, what does the healing of the nations mean? What about this reign of God? It talks about us reigning with Christ. What does that mean? It probably means that we're not like, it's not like a big day off in heaven.

It probably means that, I mean, if you're like me, you may have thought for a long time that heaven was like just a really long, like a really great church service. And like we have some pretty good church services.

This would be a bit disappointing though, wouldn't it? No, reigning with Christ, I don't know who we're going to reign over, but there's going to be work. There's going to be working with Christ.

Anyway, we don't have time to talk about that. In summary here, heaven is, it's solid. And it's social. And it's a community. Most importantly, God's going to be there.

[21 : 49] And you may ask, how does that help me now? How does this specific promise, this concrete truth, how does it help us now? Well, you remember the book was originally written to these churches and cities.

And these churches were facing enormous persecution. Persecution to degrees that we will never know. People covered in tar and set alight, human torches, like awful, horrible stuff.

But the historical evidence suggests that many, many, many Christians went to their death praising God. Because they had this wonderful hope. They believe this wonderful hope.

And we have the same resources they do, if not more. And I ask myself, goodness, what's my excuse for compromising? I remember J.I. Packer speaking about this one day in this passage.

And he says, he goes, so what do we do with these words here? What do we do with these thoughts I've just given you? And he goes, you think them. I thought, that's great. That's such a great thing to say.

[22 : 50] What do you do with these thoughts I've given you? You think them. You think them. You consider them. You think about this great hope. You let it shape your allegiance. You let it shape your commitments. We let the values of this future home shape our behavior in our current one.

All in the knowledge that the future belongs to God. It's kind of like this. Imagine two folks working in a factory that makes widgets. And they don't get paid monthly.

They get paid once right at the end of that time. And at the end of the time, one of those guys is going to get... This is a story I heard another preacher say I thought was an excellent example. At the end of that time, one of those folks is going to get paid \$30,000.

The other folk is going to get paid \$30 million. Now, the guy getting paid \$30 million, he's going to feel pretty okay about those early mornings.

He will not be incredibly frustrated by the smell, going home smelling like oil and gas or whatever's going on in that factory. He's not going to be too worried about the knicks on his knuckles that he gets from working the machines.

[23 : 58] Hope has transformed him. Now, we don't get a big cash payout at the end. But what we get is something infinitely more beautiful, more wonderful, and our greatest desire.

And that is we will see the face of God. That is our hope. Amen.