

Heaven is Not Just the Eternal Day Off (Early Morning Service)

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, we praise you for your word and we thank you for your hope that you give to us. We pray, Father, that you will form us in that hope and by that hope, that we will know your joy, your strength in us as we serve you in this world.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Please be seated. Well, I want to echo Joel's welcome, and it's wonderful that you were able to come through the snow to be here, and you thought that winter was over.

Here we are in March. I think we've seen the white stuff, and it always seems to come on Sunday. I don't know why that is this year, but I'm glad you persevered and have come through, and we've been persevering in Revelation as well.

In fact, I think that's one of the great themes of Revelation, is our own persevering in our loyalty and our relationship with God and Jesus Christ, who is our Lord.

And this passage, if you want to turn to page 1041, is big and it is a beautiful vision. And I have less than 15 minutes to talk about it.

[1 : 13] So I want to just look at a glimpse of what we're looking at in this reading. And to tell you that really this passage starts in verse 9 of chapter 21 with a tale of two cities, because that angel that starts speaking to John is the same angel with the seven bulls and seven last plagues who was speaking back in chapter 17, and he introduced Babylon.

And of course, Babylon, if you remember, is the human society. It's a symbol of human society that rebels against God and hates God. But then today we see the new Jerusalem, the second city, in much more detail than we heard earlier last week.

And in it we see God dwelling with his people, and his glory fills Jerusalem. And the question throughout Revelation is, which city are you going to choose?

Where will your heart be? Where will your loyalties lie? Will you live by obedience to God's word that leads to his city?

Or will you live by the deception of Babylon, where your fulfillment is offered but not really given? Well, it's hard as we live in Babylon today to answer that question sometimes.

[2 : 38] We live in Babylon, but we live for the other city, another city. And discernment's needed because there's a good legacy from Christian past that still is in Babylon because of Christian influence.

So there's a commitment to justice and to care for the needy and freedom to worship. But we are a lot like Daniel, who lived in the literal Babylon right now.

Throughout Daniel's life, his long life, of course, he experienced both persecution for his faith, but also a great deal of success in Babylon.

Extraordinary success. And so there was great pressure from both sides to give up his faith and to choose Babylon.

But three times a day, he opened his window to Jerusalem, which is 900 miles away. And he prayed to God because that is where his heart was.

[3 : 39] It was with the city of God. And I think today we experience the same pressure. There's peer pressure. There's pressure from success. And there's pressure from a type of persecution as well.

So we are like Daniel in this way. And the Holy Spirit is at work now with you to live by God's word in Babylon as citizens of Jerusalem, just as Daniel did.

And one of the gifts that the Holy Spirit uses for this is this reading that we had from Revelation because it shows glimpses of the splendor of the new Jerusalem, which is your inheritance, which is your future as well.

And I want to pick out three aspects of it in the short time that I have of this Jerusalem. I want to talk about the people of the city, the splendor of the people. And I want to talk about the splendor of the light and then the splendor of the love of that city.

So the first thing is the splendor of the people. The city is not inanimate walls and foundation and gates, as you might think when you first come to it.

[4 : 53] The angel in verse 9 says, Come, I'll show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carries me away in the Spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

You know, you expect to see a bride, a person, a symbol, and you see a city. And that's because that city is full of human relationships.

And that city is in relationship to the groom who is Jesus. And so in verse 12, on the gates of the city, the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed.

And this tells us that the city is actually the true people of God, the people of Israel. And then in verse 14, he says, And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

And of course, the twelve in all of this is about the perfect number, the people of God in its fulfillment. And we're seeing there that all the structures really symbolize the people of God who have been redeemed, who have been changed by the power of God's word that was sent through those twelve apostles that Jesus has bought for himself.

[6 : 15] Jesus has made his own. So this is a city that is full of life. It is the people. And they are the wife of the Lamb, from verse 9, which means they are the people who have been cleansed by Jesus.

And I want to remind us of this wonderful passage from Ephesians 5, because the gift of that being the wife of the Lamb is that we have been made ready.

God has made it possible for us to come into that city. Ephesians 5 says this. It says, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Well, what a gift it is for us to know that we can be cleaned by God's word. I know that you feel the way I do, that we are not spotless.

We are not clean yet. We are very far away from what God intends us to be. But it is because of Jesus the Lamb's work for us that you see the splendor of God's people that you will be part of in verses 11 through 21.

[7 : 44] And there's striking things about that splendor. First of all, the people of God are pure. So that you see at the end of verse 11, they have the glory of God, and like a most rare jewel, they are like jasper, clear as crystal.

And then in verse 18, this city is of pure gold, like clear glass. And then in verse 21, the street of the city was pure gold. It was like transparent glass.

Well, those images are talking about the purity that the Lamb gives to us, the bride. He has washed us. He has set us apart for fellowship with him.

And that's what will define the new heaven and the new earth. This is what they will look like. And thank God, he is in that process of making us pure now.

He is starting now. And that's the end result. But another striking thing about the splendor of God's people is that they are precious to him.

[8 : 48] And so if you look at verses 19 through 21, you have the most costly and beautiful jewels, some of which are very hard to pronounce. And it is a picture of how God looks at his people.

And so he says, the wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel.

What a picture. It is a picture of how God looks at his people. Do you remember from Isaiah 43, he said, I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. You are precious in my sight, and I love you.

That's from the Old Testament. You are honored. Well, the city of God radiates with God's pleasure for his people. And you are one of those people, if you have come to trust in Jesus as your Savior, what a gift it is to know that you will be eternally praised by God.

And that his love for you will continually be the life of that city. It's a praise that is worth living for now. You know, we often think of going to be with God to praise him, which is absolutely what will be happening.

[10 : 07] But God will also praise you. You will know the preciousness that you are to him, the value you are to him, according to this city. Now, the second aspect of the New Jerusalem, besides the splendor of the people, is the splendor of the light.

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

You see, the glory of the city, the glory of God gives the whole city light. And that's fulfillment of the prophecy that the glory of the Lord will fill all of the earth.

And that's why the dimensions of the city is so large. So verse 15 says, that this is a perfect cube of 12,000 stadium. Well, that's 1,400 miles.

Why does he give that number? Well, it's because it's really big. It would be the distance from Jerusalem to Rome, and then Jerusalem to Afghanistan. It's really the known world at that time.

[11 : 19] It's talking about the measurement of the universe. It's a perfect cube as well, which is very important, because the Holy of Holies was the cube in Jerusalem.

It was the holiest place in Jerusalem and the world. It was where the presence of God dwelt. And in the earthly temple, if you remember, there were signs that were often saying, no further.

So the courts of the Gentiles had a sign. You couldn't go further in towards the Holy of Holies. The Jews could go further in, but then there was another sign. Don't go further, just for the priests. And then further on, another sign, only chief priests.

And then one person could go into the Holy of Holies. And it's a sign that says, I'm dwelling with you, but don't come too close, because I'm too holy for you. And things are cut off by a great curtain in the end.

But Jesus permanently and universally opens that curtain to all of the earth, to all of the universe. And all of the world, all of creation becomes the new Holy of Holies.

[12 : 29] And it's there that we will dwell in his glory and see his glory as purified ones who can actually be in that presence. Later on in the service, if we say the Gloria, we will say, in Cranmer's words, we give thanks to you for your great glory.

Well, how can we do that? This passage gives us a glimpse of that great glory to give God thanks for. And so indeed, we can pray, live for the praise of that glory.

Now, finally, the third thing about the splendor, not only the splendor of the people, not only the splendor of his light, but there is the splendor of the love of the city.

In that city, we will be filled with the love of God. There's a deeply loving relationship with God and the Lamb and God's people.

You can see this in verse 3. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in that city, and his servants will worship him. Now, this doesn't mean that heaven will be an eternal worship service that never ends.

[13 : 40] And you can say, thanks be to God for that. Because the word worship here is translated as serve. The servants are actively serving. Much better translation.

They take joy in being about the master's plans, it's saying. And they love hearing the voice of the Lamb and responding to his call. There's a joyful adventure in this, verse 3, in carrying out God's beautiful and his perfect will in this new universe that is so very good for the servant.

There is this deep sense of joy that his servants serve him. There's love there. And that joy comes because of verse 4. And that is that they will see his face.

And his name, the name of the Lamb, the name of God, will be on their foreheads. You see, in that verse, they are fully experiencing God's love for them.

And I can't imagine what that's like to see the face of God. We can't fully comprehend what that will be. But seeing the face of Jesus means knowing him as he is.

[14 : 51] And it's not knowing as through a glass darkly, through a dirty window, as we read in 1 Corinthians. But it's knowing him clearly. And intimately.

It is seeing the person who you have worshipped here and served without seeing all your life. The deepest desire of every Christian, I believe, is to see the face of God.

To know him. To know that you are loved by him and to love him in return. And if God the Holy Spirit has brought you into faith in Jesus, that is your desire.

To love him perfectly and to know that you are loved in him. And so we shall. We shall have that desire fulfilled. And more than knowing, just knowing the love of God, it says at the end of our passage that we will reign with him.

Well, what does it mean to reign? We don't know the specifics, but it does mean that we will serve God in the way that he chooses. And that it will be very, very good indeed.

[15 : 55] Well, what does this mean for us today as we close this sermon? All that is presented in as future here actually begins here and now.

If it was out of touch, if this was sort of a fantasy, it would be something that we have no experience of now. But the fact is that with Jesus, we actually begin this future today.

We choose the city of God now. And we live out our identity as those who are precious, as those who have been made pure and holy.

And we do that by purity in our thought, by choosing how we live and what we think as ones who have been cleansed by Jesus Christ.

That's why we pray at the beginning of this service, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit. That cleaning work is happening now. And really, the season of Lent is moving us to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts and the way that we live so that we can perfectly love Jesus and worthily magnify his holy name through Christ our Lord.

[17 : 13] We can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, cooperate with the cleansing work of Jesus. And secondly, we can give God thanks for his great glory now. We settle for the things of Babylon that Babylon offers very easily because our minds are not filled with the glory of God that we don't fully see now.

But one day, the world will be filled with that glory. And this passage gives us a glimpse of that, something that we live for, the praise of his glory. And finally, we can know his love now.

And this is the gospel for us, isn't it? The gospel is that God has adopted us, that he has loved us and made us his very own. And it's in our serving that we deepen our love and know him more intimately.

It's in the adventure of hearing his call and obeying that we come to know him in a deeper way. That is our immense privilege, to hear his voice today through his word and serve him in the way he chooses.

God, give us grace by his Holy Spirit to say to him, yes, Lord Jesus, I choose Jerusalem. I choose you for the praise of your glory.

[18 : 25] Amen.