

# “Heaven on Earth”

Revelation 21:1-5; 22:1-5, 17-21

**All shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well. And now, with the arrival of heaven, it is so.**



This week, we come to our second study in Revelation.

John’s final visions paint stunning images of the fulfillment of God’s promises, the *Missio Dei*. After everything went so tragically wrong in the Garden, God came to Abraham and Sarah and promised to put things right through them, so that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them (Genesis 12:3). And, indeed, in Rev. 22, the leaves of the tree of life (the tree from the Garden of Eden story) are for “the healing of the nations.”

Moses could not see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:12-23) but here in Revelation 22, we are told that God’s people “will see his face and his name will be on their forehead.”

The prophets looked ahead to an enormous burst of God’s creativity with the arrival of a new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17). Now in Revelation 21:1, they arrive; heaven comes to earth. Or to put it better, earth and heaven become one.

Every hope, every dream that lies in our hearts comes to its realization in these last two chapters. Reconciliation, hope, health, peace, joy, and life itself. They are all here in the abundance of God’s grace.

And as with the rest of Revelation, the closing visions are like a stained-glass window in which each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The “new heaven and new earth” is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises “a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life” (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life.

Of course, much of this can be hard to see. The library of sacred writings we call the Bible is vast. It’s easy to get lost in its expanse. 66 books. 1,189 chapters. 31,102 verses.<sup>1</sup> Written, compiled, and edited over many centuries. Millennia ago. Yet, there is an over-arching narrative to this vast library. Here is the story, told not in six acts, but in 109 words:

God created the cosmos, pronounced it good, and made humans in his image. He gave them a beautiful place to live and work. Yet, tragically, they tossed it all away for the chance to be like gods themselves. So God set about to put things right. God chose a people, Abraham and his descendants, through whom this restoration would proceed. In the end, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, did for Israel and all humanity what they were and we still are unable to do for ourselves – simply to love God and to love neighbor, enabling the rescue of God’s people and the restoration of God’s good creation.

It is this restoration of God’s creation that is depicted at the end of Revelation with the arrival of the new heaven and new earth. These chapters are about the final consummation of the *Missio Dei* – *The Mission of God*.

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<sup>1</sup> No need to e-mail me if you have a different number. It all depends on which translation is used, the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts, and who is doing the counting. It is helpful to remember that the original texts had no chapter and verse divisions; these were added much later.

## ***The Holy City comes to us***

One of the things that should surprise you the most about Revelation is that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes to earth, not vice versa. The story doesn't end with God's people being spirited way to some distant spot in the cosmos, but with heaven coming to earth. I am pretty sure this is not how many Christians envision eternity. Don't we head off to spend eternity in our true home, the "place" we came from? No. This is Plato creeping back into things again. In Revelation, the City of God, the new Jerusalem, the Holy City comes here! The city comes down out of heaven (21:10). N. T. Wright, one of the foremost New Testament scholars of our day helps us to grasp this crucial aspect of John's vision:

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. No: they are different, radically different; but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And, when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God's project is going forwards; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God's will for creation.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn't mean, as I have stressed throughout, that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel's vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual center stage, there is no Temple in this city (21:22). The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary. As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the

## **GOD CREATES EVERYTHING AND IT IS GOOD**

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . ." Most also know that God pronounced it good: "And God saw that the light was good; . . ." God created all that is -- all matter, all energy -- and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. The final chapters of Revelation are a vision of the God's restoration of his creation. When Revelation ends, the cosmic warp and distortion of sin has been washed away; creation again is as God created it to be.

Yet, despite all this, we humans seem to be drawn to the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual or, as some might say, "it is our souls that really matter, our bodies are just smelly, easy-to-break vessels for our souls." But this is not the Christian view.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let's look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God's creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God's kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God's kingdom evident to all. We can't build the kingdom, that is God's work, but we can build for the kingdom. Every kind touch, every mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice -- none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God's renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical and the spiritual.

new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The End is a Who***

I suppose we can't help but think of the Revelation's conclusion as "The End," like the final credits that roll at the end of a movie. Certainly, the Bible helps us to grasp God's story and our place in it. As Wright puts it, we are the ones in the story between Acts and Revelation. And, yes, one of the many gifts of the Jews to us all, as Tom Cahill put it, is the knowledge that we are headed somewhere, that history has an arc, a destination. But we should never forget that at "The End," stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted in John's visions. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God's promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God's colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever.

*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

### **Living Revelation**

In his New Interpreter's Bible commentary on Revelation, Christopher Rowland reflects on Revelation's claims to authority and the challenge of living with John's apocalyptic visions:

"We are left in no doubt about the importance John attached to his book [see the blessings of 1:3 and the warnings of 22:18-19]. It is ironic that the book in the New Testament with the most exalted claim to authority is the one that is least read and most widely despised. Even if we cannot understand its message in its entirety and are uncomfortable with the import of what we can understand, we must not ignore it. It stands not only at the end of the New Testament, but at the end of the Christian Bible. Thus it may offer us a key to understanding the whole story, because it points to the fulfillment of God's purposes, of which all else gives only a partial and fragmentary example. Its message is about God and about human history. Its scope is panoramic, and its focus on Jesus as the key to understanding the fulfillment of God's justice is central. Revelation may enable us to look back over the biblical story and make sense of the whole as well as pointedly reminding us of the demands made on us by a God who regards every action as significant. We may begin to glimpse what the Spirit says to the churches and learn to respond accordingly: 'Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates' (22:14 NRSV; cf. 7:14)."

"Revelation is intended to be heard and read. Keeping the words is not about defensiveness or preservation, nor is it simply a matter of intellectual understanding confined to academy or church. Keeping the words means practicing their message in life. It is a matter of being so utterly informed and pervaded by the words that one can perceive that 'the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.' John had to devour the book, and there is a sense in which the reader and the hearer must do that with Revelation— digest it so that one also can 'prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.' Thus the effect of reading the text is to condition an outlook on life whereby image and metaphor jar us awake and transform our actions as well as our attitudes. The temptation is to ask what this book is about and to seek references in history—past, present, or future. But first and foremost, Revelation is meant to be heard and to be read, so that the reader/listener is changed; that change means repentance and rebirth (cf. Matt 19:28)."

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (116–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.