

Revelation Ch. 21: New Jerusalem

Jeff Randolph
June 2008

We will now continue the vision of the beautiful bride of Christ that was initiated earlier (19:7). Just as old Jerusalem has been made desolate and has passed away, the New Jerusalem is glorified in all her magnificence. This city represents the righteous people of God for all time, the church in heaven and on earth (Heb. 12:22-24; cf. Eph. 3:15). The descriptions that follow really transcend time, emphasizing that she is precious in His sight, both now and forever.

Verse 1

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

Following from the vision just seen, one might conclude that the first heaven and first earth passing away is the physical realm, and the new heaven and earth represent the spiritual realm of heaven (cf. 20:11). However, it seems more reasonable to interpret heaven and earth here not as actual abodes, but as orders of spiritual existence. It is a picture of great spiritual change.

We have previously seen calamity and punishment pictured as the earth being shaken, the sun and moon growing dark, and heaven being rolled up as a scroll (Rev. 6:12-14; Isa. 13:10-13; 34:4; Joel 2:30-32; 3:14-21). It is therefore logical to conclude that a time of prosperity and joy would be pictured as a new heaven and new earth. Just as the nation of Israel and the old city were about to be shaken (Rev. 6:12-14; Isa. 13:13; 34:4; Heb. 12:26-29; Joel 3:16), the New Jerusalem would prosper, and is all that remains both now and forever (3:12; 19:7; 21:2; Heb. 8:6, 13; 9:1-28; 12:22-29; Isa. 51:16).

In the same way the kingdom of God is present both now (Matt. 4:17; Col. 1:13; Rev. 12:10) and forever (Lk. 1:33; 1 Cor. 15:50; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18), the new heaven and new earth represent the New Testament order, Christianity, both now and forever (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 3:21; 2 Pet. 3:13; Jude 25). Consider the following passages.

Isaiah describes the new heaven and new earth as the spiritual change brought forth in Christianity:

You shall leave your name as a curse to My chosen; for the Lord God will slay you, and call His servants by another name...For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. (Isa. 65:15, 17-19; cf. Rev. 7:15-17; 21:4)

And I will also take some of them for priests and Levites, says the Lord. For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the Lord. (Isa. 66:18-24; cf. Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; Isa. 2:1-4)

The Hebrew writer speaks similarly of the establishment of the new covenant:

...“Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. (Heb. 12:18-29; cf. Joel 3:14-21; Hag. 2:4-7)

The apostle Peter seems* to associate the new heavens and new earth with heaven itself:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet. 3:10-13)

The statements made in this chapter concerning the New Jerusalem transcend time, as they have application now, and will be ultimately realized in eternity. “As we shall see repeatedly throughout our study of this chapter, that which is to be absolutely and completely true in eternity is definitively and progressively true *now*” (Chilton, p. 538). The new heaven and new earth exist presently, and will remain forever.

Perhaps there is *no more sea* in the sense that the barriers of separation, both the societal barrier between Jew and Gentile (Isa. 65:25; 66:10-12; Rom. 1:16; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 3:11), and the spiritual barrier between God and man (Eph. 2:16), have been removed in Christ (Isa. 59:2; Rom. 5:10; cf. Rev. 4:6; 15:2). This could also just be mentioned to emphasize the spiritual nature of this new order.

The idea that this new heaven and earth is some sort of physical reality, such as a renovated earth, is incorrect. Not only does it contradict other Scriptures (Jn. 18:36; Lk. 17:20, 21), it is contrary to the symbolic nature of this book (1:1).

**Note: Though this writer does not currently hold this view, there are some who believe that the entirety of 2 Peter 3 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and end of the old covenant order, rather than the end of time. Some passages to consider along these lines, in addition to Peter's reference to Isaiah 65 and 66, are Isaiah 34:4 and Galatians 4:3. For an interesting discussion on this, see Chilton, pp. 539-544.*

Verse 2

Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband.

Continuing with the picture of the marriage supper (19:7), we see the bride of Christ (21:9), New Jerusalem, descending from heaven (cf. 3:12). This city is the beautiful mother of the righteous (Gal. 4:26; cf. Rev. 12:1), and contrasts with the old Jerusalem, Babylon the Great, mother of harlots (17:5;

cf. Heb. 13:14).

The New Jerusalem is a picture of the church. Her inhabitants include the people of God, living in both the heavenly and earthly realms, both before and after the death of Christ (Heb. 11:10, 13-16; 12:22-24; cf. Matt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28; Jn. 8:56). She is a city, because her inhabitants are citizens of heaven (Phi. 3:20). She is a mother, because her children are the righteous (Gal. 4:26; Rev. 19:8). She is a bride, because she is bound to Him who gave His life for her (Eph. 5:23-25; cf. Isa. 54:1; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:30-32; Hos. 1:2; Rom. 7:4; 2 Cor. 11:2).

The new heavens and new earth are not meant to picture heaven itself, but a new order of existence, Christianity, in which the blessings of God are extended to man as they become members of His church, and therefore citizens of His New Jerusalem (22:14; cf. Phi. 3:20). Now that physical Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed, Christianity stands out distinct from Judaism (and paganism), for all the world to see, as the one true religion of God (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Though the church suffers from problems without and within (Rev. 2-3), and men look upon it with scorn and disdain, the descriptions that follow of this beautiful city picture the hope amidst suffering (21:4; cf. Rom. 12:12; Col. 1:5; 1 Thes. 4:13-18; Heb. 6:19). The vision describes how God sees His people, both now and forever (cf. Isa. 55:8; 1 Cor. 1:18-31).

Verse 3

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

This is a picture of a restored relationship with God (7:15; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; cf. Ezek. 37:27; 48:35). He dwells in our hearts while we journey through this life (Acts 3:19; Rom. 8:9; Col. 3:16), until we dwell with Him eternally in the next (Jn. 14:3; 1 Thes. 4:17).

Verse 4

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

This is a symbol of the spiritual blessings found only in Christ (Eph. 1:3), and the hope we have today of things to be fully realized in heaven (cf. 7:16, 17).

- 1) God will wipe away every tear from their eyes – Though heartache and tears accompany our experiences in this life, we can turn to God as a source of comfort (7:17; Isa. 25:8; 65:19; cf. Heb. 4:16), and look to a time of eternal joy (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17).
- 2) There shall be no more death – In the ultimate sense, this will occur at the return of Christ (cf. 20:14; 1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55), though we fully realize today that a Christian no longer has to fear death (Heb. 2:14, 15; Rom. 8:38; Phi. 1:21). What a blessing it will be to never again experience the pain that comes with losing a loved one.
- 3) Nor sorrow, nor crying – This is reiterating the first statements, that we can be delivered from all things that cause us to cry, by seeking refuge in Christ (Heb. 6:18), and looking forward to an eternity without sorrow. Let us focus on how much more we will appreciate the total absence of these things in heaven, after having experienced them on earth (Rom. 8:18).

- 4) There shall be no more pain – Once again, while we suffer affliction in this life, both emotional and physical, it does not compare with what awaits us in heaven (2:10; Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:53; 1 Pet. 1:4). If we set our thoughts on things above, we can overcome our pain in this life, looking forward to a painless existence in the next (Col. 3:1, 2; Matt. 6:19, 20).

This passage represents the hope that Christians have in this life, with a view toward the next (cf. Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; Jn. 10:10). God wants us to overcome the problems that characterize life on earth, the things that cause pain and tears, with thoughts of the absence of such things in heaven. Without this hope, living the Christian life would not be possible (Rom. 8:24, 25; 15:13; 1 Cor. 15:19; 2 Cor. 1:7; Heb. 6:19).

Verse 5

Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

The statement made here is present tense, God is actively making all things new. Of course, He is not talking about physical things, but things spiritual, as men and women put on the new name of Christ (2:17; 3:12), rising to a new life (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), and continually being cleansed of sin (1 Jn. 1:7).

The new heaven and the new earth are the new order by means of the new covenant (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15), in which citizens of New Jerusalem are renewed in spirit each day, through the assurance of the things to come (2 Cor. 4:16; Col. 2:2; Heb. 10:22). The culmination of all things new is heaven itself, a place specially prepared for the people of God (Jn. 14:3) that is eternally new (Matt. 6:19, 20).

Verse 6

And He said to me, “It is done!” I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

The church is fully built up, Babylon (Jerusalem) has been taken out of the way (18:21), the fate of the Roman beasts, and Satan, and all enemies of God, even Death itself, is certain (19:20, 21; 20:10, 14; cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-26). God's plan of redemption has been unfolded (Lk. 18:31; Jn. 19:28-30; Rev. 10:7; 16:17; cf. Rev. 15:8; Eph. 4:13). As the Eternal One (1:8, 11; 22:13), the plan had been stored up since the beginning, and has now come to fruition for us to follow (Eph. 3:9-12).

The fountain symbolizes the source of all spiritual blessings, provided by Christ (Eph. 1:3; cf. Joel 3:18). All who thirst for truth, and for comfort, and for rest, can come to the fountain freely, and partake in these blessings (7:16, 17; 22:1, 17; Matt. 5:6; Jn. 4:14; 6:35; 7:37; cf. Jn. 8:32; Rom. 6:23).

Men have searched far and wide for the Fountain of Youth, yet the eternal life which it is said to provide has already been graciously given by God through the sacrifice of His Son (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 6:23).

Verse 7

“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.

Those who overcome this world (cf. 2:7, 11; 3:5; 3:12, 21) have an incorruptible inheritance awaiting in heaven (Jn. 14:2, 3; 1 Pet. 1:4). The language applied to Christ (Heb. 1:5; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chr. 17:14; 22:10; 28:6) is here applied to His people. Since Jesus is heir of all things (Heb. 1:2), so are His

followers as the children of God (Rom. 8:14, 16, 17; 2 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 3:26; 4:5-7; Tit. 3:7).

Verse 8

But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

The lake of fire, symbolizing ultimate defeat, is the second death, which for the wicked means eternal separation from God in hell (20:14, 15). This is contrasted with the righteous that will inherit all spiritual blessings and overcome this fate (cf. 2:11; 20:6; Col. 1:1-17). This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of sins, but comes pretty close to capturing all wickedness (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21).

The cowardly should remind us of those who claim to be Christians, yet are afraid to confess Christ (Matt. 10:33; 26:75; Jn. 12:42; 2 Tim. 2:12). The unbelieving may be “nice people” but will likewise die in their sins (Jn. 8:24; 2 Thes. 1:8; Heb. 3:19; 4:11).

The abominable are those who participate in things that are detestable to God (1 Pet. 4:3). Murderers need no explanation, while sexually immoral refers to inappropriate sexual conduct (Matt. 5:28; 19:9; 1 Cor. 6:9, 18; Gal. 5:19; 1 Thes. 4:3; Heb. 13:4). A sorcerer was one who deceived people with magic (Acts 8:9-11), often by using drugs (Greek *pharmakos*).

Idolaters worship images and people, and are considered anyone who puts something before God (1 Cor. 8:4; Col. 3:5; Rev. 9:20; cf. Col. 1:18). All liars, even those who actively tell “white lies” are not fit for the kingdom of heaven (21:27; 22:15; Jn. 8:44; Acts 5:3; 1 Tim. 4:2; 1 Jn. 1:8; 2:4; 4:20).

Any sin in which one refuses to repent will be cause for eternal punishment (Acts 17:30, 31).

Verses 9-11

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.

The bride is the New Jerusalem (19:7; 21:2; cf. Eph. 5:25). She is here glorified as the true people and religion of God (Eph. 3:21; 5:27), and precious in His sight, contrasted with the outward, deceptive beauty of Babylon the harlot (17:4; 18:12, 16). The great and high mountain signifies her elevation above all others, and ties in with symbolism of Mt. Zion, which is also a picture of the church (14:1; Heb. 12:22). The vision fits perfectly with another description given by Jesus (Matt. 5:14).

Her light is the word of God (cf. 1:12; Matt. 5:16; Jn. 12:46; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Eph. 5:8), the precious message of hope for all to hear and believe (1 Pet. 1:7; 2 Pet. 1:4). The significance of the jasper may simply be its beauty and purity, since this normally opaque stone is described as being clear as crystal (cf. 4:3; 21:18, 19).

Verses 12-13

Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on

the east, there gates on the north, there gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

The names of the tribes of the children of Israel could be the same names as listed earlier (7:5-8), or those from Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 48:30-35). These names appear on the gates to the city perhaps for a number of reasons.

- 1) It was Israel that brought forth the Messiah (Isa. 9:6; Matt. 1:1-16; 12:1, 2).
- 2) It was Israel that was first taught the gospel (Matt. 15:24; Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16).
- 3) It was the Old Testament Scriptures that provided a proper background regarding what the message of Christ is all about (Rom. 15:4; Gal. 3:24; cf. Rev. 11:3-6).

The gates are now open to anyone who desires to follow Christ (21:25; 22:14; Ps. 118:19; Isa. 60:11; cf. Acts 10:45; Gal. 3:28), and be part of the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). There is more than one gate because we all arrive at our decision to follow Christ from a different angle, yet the means of entrance into His church are the same (Acts 2:47).

Verse 14

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The names of the apostles are written on the foundations because Jesus commissioned them to deliver His message and set up His church (Matt. 16:18, 19; Acts 2; Eph. 2:20-22). It is the message of Christ through the apostles, and no one else, that the church stands upon today (cf. Gal. 1:1-12; Eph. 3:5; Jude 17). Unlike old Jerusalem, the foundations of this city are sure (Heb. 11:10), and its walls will never be broken down (Matt. 16:18).

Verse 15

And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall.

Just as the old city was measured and prepared for destruction, the new is prepared for glory, a demonstration of its perfection and grandeur (Ezek. 40-44; Zech. 2; Heb. 11:16; cf. Rev. 11:1). As previously mentioned, there is a standard of measure by which one must live in order to be part of the city of God (cf. Ezek. 44:5), and that is His word (Jn. 12:48).

Verses 16-17

The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. Then he measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel.

The city is 12,000 furlongs (1,500 miles), and is a perfect square (or cube). The walls are 144 cubits high (12 x 12), symbolizing the perfect and complete protection of God (7:1-4; Matt. 16:18; cf. Isa. 60:18; Zech. 2:4, 5). To John, this city would have filled most of the world as he knew it, signifying that this city is for everyone (Acts 2:39; Gal. 3:28).

Verse 18

The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass.

Like the light shining from the city (21:11), the wall was of jasper, and the city itself of pure gold. Like the clear jasper, the gold was also like clear glass, making this a symbol of how precious and valuable we are to God (cf. Lk. 12:7). Perhaps the wall of jasper is indicative of the appeal to those outside, while the pure gold is the value realized by those inside (Ogden, p. 386).

Verse 19-20

The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.

These are the same stones that appeared in the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:17-21), and some were also associated with the glory of God (cf. 4:3). They are all precious stones that symbolize the value of this city, and contrast with the deceptive beauty of the harlot (17:4; 18:16; cf. Isa. 54:10-12). These stones would have been the most valuable substances known at that time (cf. Ezek. 28:13).

Verse 21

The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

This continues the imagery of an incredibly valuable city, emphasizing just how much we mean to God, and where we should be laying up our treasures (Matt. 6:19, 20; Lk. 16:11; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:8; Heb. 11:26; cf. Rev. 5:12). These descriptions are as much as can be comprehended by the human mind. Though songs we sing speak of streets of gold, there is but one street in this city, perhaps representing that the righteous within it walk the same way, that is, live a godly life according to the Scriptures (Eph. 5:8; 1 Jn. 1:7; cf. Acts 9:2; Isa. 35:8).

Verse 22

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

Though the temple has been depicted as the church elsewhere in this book (7:15; 11:19; 15:5; 2 Cor. 6:16), symbolizing the presence of God in the lives of His people (Acts 3:19; Rom. 8:9; Col. 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:13; Rev. 3:12; 21:3), the church is now being looked at from the perspective of the city New Jerusalem. This, then, is a similar picture of God dwelling amongst His people, but is here intended to contrast with old Jerusalem. Unlike the old city, the new has no need for a temple, for the Lord God and the Lamb are its temple (Acts 7:48; 17:24), both now and forever.

Verse 23

The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

This is not a physical city that is part of a physical kingdom, but a spiritual one (Jn. 18:36), illuminated by the glory of God and the Lamb (Jn. 1:9; 8:12; 12:46; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn. 1:5, 7; cf. Rev. 4-5). The fact that the sun and moon were figuratively darkened during this period did not matter to the true people of God (Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12; 8:12; 9:2; cf. Zech. 14:7), because they walk by the light of the gospel (Ps. 119:105, 130; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Isa. 62:1). Read Isa. 60:1-22.

Verses 24-26

And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.

The inhabitants of this city are the saved, those who walk in the light of His word (Eph. 5:8; 1 Jn. 1:7; cf. Isa. 35:9; 49:6). Though some kings have been condemned (19:19-21), some have and will obey the gospel and follow Christ, in which they use their influence for His cause and not their own (cf.

13:5-8). While the inhabitants of old Jerusalem were primarily Jewish, people from all nations inhabit the New Jerusalem (Isa. 66:23; Lk. 3:6; Acts 2:17; Gal. 3:28).

Unlike the old city (Neh. 13:19; cf. Ezek. 44:1-3; 46:1, 2), the gates of this city are always opened to those who desire to enter (22:14; Isa. 60:11; cf. Isa. 26:2). There is no night because the message of Christ constantly illuminates His followers, and is always shining in order to deliver those living in sinful darkness (Jn. 12:46; Acts 26:18).

Verse 27

But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Those who practice sin cannot enter the city (21:8; 22:15; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:1-10), but only those who have washed their sins in the blood of the Lamb (7:14; cf. Jn. 3:5; Acts 22:16), and have had their names registered in the Book of Life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; Lk. 10:20; Phi. 4:3; Heb. 12:23). The New Testament describes the saved as being added to the church (Acts 2:47). The saved are members of the church, just as those written in the Book of Life are citizens of the New Jerusalem, and will ultimately inhabit a “mansion” in heaven (Jn. 14:1-3).

*All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.