

All Things New: The City Of God
By Jason Huff
Psalm 46; Hebrews 12:18-29; Revelation 21:9-27

Our final Scripture reading is from Revelation 21:9-27. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

For almost all my life, I've lived in a city. Except for a three-year stint in college that only had enough people to be called a town, every place I've lived has had enough people to qualify at 5,000 people. Even Wilmore, the tiny place I went to seminary, has enough residents to meet the requirements. Of course, there's a huge difference between a city of 5,000 and 5 million. When we think of cities, we think of lots of people in a small space; it's not easy to get away from others. Sometimes, we think the best way to experience God's presence is to get into nature, out into His creation to experience all the goodness He made. There's some truth to that.

And yet, God loves the city. Biblically, the place of rebellion is the wilderness. The wilderness was where the Israelites rejected God and His ways numerous times, enough that only the children of the Israelites who God led out of Egypt were able to enter the promised land. When the book of Revelation introduced us to Babylon the great harlot that seduces the nations, the angel took John out to the wilderness to see her. When John gets a better look at the New Jerusalem, the angel takes him to the high mountain where the city is placed. Not out to nature, but to the mountain meant for the city of God. The dwelling place of God is in the city.

Even in the earliest days of Israel, God was present with His people at the tabernacle in their wanderings. When the Hebrews took the promised land, the tabernacle still stood in the city of Shiloh as the place they were to worship until the temple was built in Jerusalem in Solomon's time. Throughout Israel's history, God commanded that His worship not be on all the high places, the high hills and mountains throughout the land, but in one place -- the city where He designated He would meet His people.

It seems that while God meets us individually where we are, He sets up shop in our lives as His own temple now through the Holy Spirit, He also meets us corporately, whether in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament or in the church in our current era. He is establishing His people as a people, as a nation, as a city. And our passage today reflects how God brings us together in His Kingdom. Because while the city as it's described is metaphorical in many ways, what we see is that God will bring us together around Himself for all eternity.

So let's step back for just a moment. Last week, we saw our first glimpse of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, which we learned is not only a promise that God has a real place for us but also represents us as God's people. We saw God getting rid of every tear and sorrow and all evil, and giving everyone who thirsts for Him the living water of eternal life. It was such a beautiful and meaningful passage that if you missed last week, I'd encourage you to take just a little extra time and watch last week's sermon to get you up to date on where we are, because this week's passage just expands upon what we saw last week.

This week's passage does what we've seen many times -- we get a close-up on what we started to see before. An angel takes John to see "the bride, the wife of the Lamb," which we've determined is symbolic of both the saints and the city where we who are saints will be with God in His Kingdom. The angel carries John away in the Spirit to the Holy City. The parallels with the presentation of the false bride, the harlot, are clear, almost precisely the same. Where once the world tried to imitate all of God's glory, now we get the real picture. Where once we'd only seen forgeries, now we are seeing the reality.

And that reality is so amazing that John has great difficulty describing it in any way that we can really understand. When he sees the glory of God emanating from the city, he tries to describe it as the brilliance of very precious jewel jasper, clear as crystal. Here's the funny part -- jasper comes in lots of colors, but it's opaque. So John is putting together two different ideas -- the brilliance of a stone readily known to his readers with something very unlike it, dazzling like a clear diamond. Later in the passage, we read that the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. How could there be a single pearl 15 stories high? How could pure gold also be see-through? John's mind is stretched to the limit trying to describe the eternal realm where the new heaven and new earth meet in some way that the human mind can comprehend.

What we really ought to get out of this, and what we'll see throughout the passage, is that *it is impossible for human language or thought to capture the glory of God in its fullness*. No matter how much we try, we cannot wrap our minds around the immense magnificence and splendor of the person of God.

Sometimes, we get ourselves tongue-tied around people that we believe are genuinely good or righteous, as if they weren't human like the rest of us. Imagine how we would feel just to experience for a moment the glory of God undimmed? In our current sinfulness, it would destroy us. It's only in the clothing of Christ's righteousness that we not only can withstand the glory of God but reflect it to others. And yet it also means that the wonder of our eternal home is far more than we can hope to grasp now.

There is a great high wall around the Holy City with twelve gates and twelve angels at the gates. This thing is immense – depending on how we read it, it's either 216 feet high or 216 feet thick, nearly three-fourths of a football field or a fifteen story building. But again, the importance here is not an exact measurement but that it is 144 cubits. That number 144 has been seen a lot in Revelation, and it comes from multiplying the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles, both of which factor into the city. It's not so much that the wall is thick or high so much as it is that the wall is perfect. And while there are guarded gates – guarded by angels, no less! – the gates never close because there is no night, which is when the gates of a city were closed.

This might get us to asking, though...why is there a need for a city wall and city gates in the first place? The enemy has been defeated; sin and death are gone; no one continues to stand in opposition to God's Kingdom. Why then the walls? Surely the city doesn't need them. We need to remember what this represented to Revelation's first readers, and what it still means for many modern readers today spread throughout the world. *The massive wall and gates remind all that they are safe in God's hands.* Israel's own history was filled with their enemies terrorizing villages, attempting to push back Israel's borders, oppressing its people. When an invader got serious, people on the outskirts would flee to the cities for protection.

When the exiles came back from Babylon, one of their leaders Nehemiah led them in the project to rebuild Jerusalem's walls to keep out those who would have destroyed them again. Half the men stood guard while the other half worked on the wall – and the workers on the wall hauled their loads with one arm with the other on their swords because the danger was so great until the walls were completed!

The city of God has walls to remind us of the final line in the passage – “nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.” For those who lived in constant fear of attack, who lived under consistent persecution, who lived in the valley of the shadow of death for their faith and hope in God, the gates are one more assurance that only that which God approves will enter into the Kingdom. No crafty serpent is going to get into the city; no trickster is going to weasel sin and death into God's holy realm. The gates are constantly guarded.

And yet those gates are always open, too. Their openness symbolizes the truth that God's Kingdom is open to all peoples from all nations and all places, open to anyone who lays aside their lives and their sins and their selfishness and embraces God as the way, the truth, and the life. The way into the Kingdom is not barred shut. No matter what your past, if your name is written in the Lamb's book of life, your future is in the holy city. No one can come and claim you after the fact. Your home with God is safe and security through all eternity.

Now turn with me to the next detail that's fascinating. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on the gates. And yet the foundations of the city walls have written on them the names of the twelve apostles. The foundations of the city walls are decorated with every kind of precious stone, but there are twelve different kinds out of which they are built. We aren't sure that we understand how every one translates to a modern precious stone, but it's meant to remind us of God's people in the Old Testament.

When the high priest went into the temple to do his priestly duties on behalf of the people, he wore many different sacred objects. One was the priestly breastplate. This breastplate was made of an embroidered cloth that was laden with twelve gemstones – each of them engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The breastplate was a reminder that the high priest served before God on behalf of the entire community, the whole people of God. Each one was more precious to God than even the precious stone that stood for each tribe. The particular stones, if they had unique meanings, are lost to us now...but together, they represented God's people when the priest made the sacrifices to atone for them and to make them right with God again.

Here's the part that's stunning. The foundations of the city walls have the names of the disciples written on them; it's those foundations on which the gates are built with the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on them. We'd expect it to be the other way around, but it's not. You'd think that the city of God was built on the foundation of the Old Testament saints, that because they come first, they laid the groundwork. Instead, the walls are built on the apostles and their testimony to the Messiah.

If we understand the metaphor properly, we see that the foundation of the entire Kingdom is Jesus. The Old Testament saints trusted in God to save them and that their Messiah would one day come to their rescue, even if it was long after their deaths. The New Testament saints (including us!) trust in what we have believe has already happened – that Jesus came as our Savior to become the perfect sacrifice for sin and to provide salvation for all who would trust in Him. The foundation has always been Jesus and the testimony to Him, even before He came. The law of the Old Testament did not save; it pointed the Old Testament saints to the need for God to release them from the debt of their sins. When we come into the Kingdom, it will be because of the foundation laid by Christ through His disciples who taught us His way.

More incredible stuff to come. The angel measures the city, and the city is a cube – nearly 1,500 miles long, wide, and high! We're talking somehow into the atmosphere to where the satellites fly. It's enormous, larger than the whole known world at the time Revelation was written. Could be literal, but it could also be metaphorical.

But what we see is that the city is built as a cube just like the most holy place in the center of the temple was a cube. The dwelling place of God with His people is the same as it always been represented. The way the temple is measured is also reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel and the temple he described that was never built. In this Jerusalem, everything represents the perfection of God. This cube-like city is the perfect place for God to live among His people.

And still more details – there is no temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. We are so used to thinking of worshiping God in a building even today. But there is no church building, no temple, no structure in which to worship God – because He’s right there! The Father and Son are called the temple to get our attention. There is no point in having a place to gather when we have personal, immediate access to God Himself. And because there is no more sin, there is no need for a place to go and make sacrifices. Because there is no distance between us, we have no need of a place to go pray and feel close to God. Because God meets the needs of all His people, we have no need of a place to organize our ministry out into the world. We don’t even need a place to fellowship together because God will have brought us all together in His perfect place forever.

The light of God is everywhere, so much that the sun and moon become irrelevant. The nations – all those from every tribe and tongue who have trusted in the Lord – will be guided by that light all their days in eternity. The great splendor of all the good that was truly done on Earth will be brought into the light to be seen and enjoyed. Everything will come together to give honor and praise to God, whose glory will finally be revealed. All these descriptions give us just a glimpse into what it will be like in the Kingdom of God.

Because we’re in a descriptive part of Revelation meant to inspire and encourage us, there’s no direct lesson for the week, just as last week. But there’s something that convicted me this week, something that I think would be wise for us to think about together after hearing and studying this passage: *is your God too small?* When we hear about the new heaven and new earth, of God’s glory so magnificent that the radiance of the brightest gems can’t capture or contain it, of a city that stretches to the stratosphere, 490 times larger than the largest city currently in existence, it’s incomprehensible. The sheer enormity of it boggles the mind. And yet God will be with His people, personally, intimately, having re-created all that we know. He is glorious in the extreme.

And yet we often think that He can’t deal with our problems. We think they are too big for Him. We think that we need to turn to governments and politicians to save us; we think we must work our way out of problems, earn our way out, smart our way out. We think that we can’t share our faith because we might offend someone or get into trouble. And yet if you lose that job, can’t God provide one that’s better? If you lose that friend, can’t God provide one who is more true, more gracious, more right for you because they respect your beliefs?

I’m not coming at this as someone who has it all together. I’ve fought those feelings. There have been plenty of times where I haven’t trusted that God could put it all together for me. But every time I have trusted God, He’s never disappointed me. When I put my faith in myself rather than God, that’s when I wind up disappointed. But the God who formed me and you, who wrote His people in the book of life before the world began, the God who created everything seen and unseen, who will make a new heaven and a new earth far, far better than what we see now, He can be trusted. Because ultimately, God is giving us a look at His glorious plan for His saints now to encourage us not just for the future but for the here and now. We can be encouraged that the maker of all worlds cares for us. We can be encouraged that there is a place for you in the city of all cities. We can be encouraged that there will be no darkness or evil there. We can be encouraged to live for God now because of all the good that is yet to come.