

**Heaven Comes Down**  
**Revelation 21**  
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**First Baptist Church of Diana, August 24, 2011**

The Apostle Paul once wrote “we see through a glass dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). That is certainly the case in many respects but none more pronounced than when we think about heaven and the kingdom to come. Often times we are so influenced by life as we know it on this earth that we cannot grasp the glory of eternity future. Revelation 21 is a chapter where John, the revelator, uses earthly language in an attempt to capture the glory and splendor of the world yet to come.

The chapter opens with a great signal of something new. At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter, Satan has been cast into the lake of fire and at the appearance of the Lord in judgment, heaven and earth has passed away. Surely the picture of chapter 20 is one of the end of evil. The picture presented in these verses allows man once again to focus on the world as it was prior to the fall in the garden and as an answer to Romans 8:21 with its description of earth crying out for redemption from the corruption that entered through the fall. For thousands of generations man has lived without any real sense of what it is to live free of the influences of evil due to the fall in the garden.

Will the earth be destroyed, or, will evil on the earth be destroyed and the existing earth be redeemed? Romans 8:21 leads to a belief of redemption. Revelation 20 and 21:1 seem to indicate total destruction of the earth. Some commentators on the passages of Revelation believe the English renderings of the text to be unfortunate. They believe the Greek language suggests redemption and rebuilding of the earth rather than annihilation. It is conceivable that the passing of the earth is as we know it rather than it ceasing to exist. If the passing away means total obliteration, why would John point out the absence of the sea? The vision portrayed in the latter chapters of Revelation is one of a total absence of evil. This imagery is beyond human conception and no doubt John was struggling to use fallen earthly language to describe life without evil. Our world is fleshly and materially driven, in the world to come material goods will be the least of our concerns. The sea was a continual threat and raised fear among the ancient civilization. John was separated from everyone and everything dear to him in exile on Patmos. Newport does not see a New Heaven and Earth without water but one with water reconfigured so as to cover much less than the current two-thirds of the earth and for it to have no terror in the hearts of men.

Part of the dilemma in interpreting Revelation is the mixing of metaphors. Notice in 21:2 John speaks of a new city coming down but he also speaks of a bride. How can a city be a bride? John is either describing something foreign to our comprehension or he is using metaphors and symbolism to describe something greater than we can imagine. Could it be that this holy city coming down is the city God is building not made by hands? Could it be that it symbolizes the work God has done in man for salvation since the fall in the garden? We are told in Philipians that God began a work in us and will complete that work. The judgment seat of Christ has already cleansed man of all his ungodly works. Those works were burned in the fire. This city

comes down from above and is not affected by the evil of the long history of mankind on the earth.

The most prolific of all statements in this chapter is found in verses 3 and 4. God is pictured here as a tabernacle and the tabernacle is with men. God is literally dwelling with men enjoying an intimate fellowship with a people he calls his own and they in turn enjoying that same intimate fellowship with him. In his presence tears will be gone as well as death. Again, John is describing life without the effects of the fall in the garden. The curse has been lifted through the judgment and with the coming of a new heaven and new earth. Whether it is all new matter or the redeemed matter of the existing continent, it will be land without curse and its inhabitants will also be free of the curse. Verse 5 continues in the thought of redemption stating it is God who is making all things new. John is then instructed to write. This makes me wonder if John was getting so wrapped up in what he was seeing that his writing utensils had found a place of rest and his mouth was gaping open with a sense of awe and grandeur creeping into his eyes.

The first 9 verses of Revelation 21 show us the provisions of God. John is drawing on all the spiritual symbols of the New Testament to describe this glorious time and place of the future. Here he uses the spiritual symbol of Jesus being the fountain that never runs dry. Clearly this is a reference to the woman at the well and Jesus words to her. The alpha and the omega point to the creating power of Jesus Christ and the function of judgment. He holds absolute authority even to the beginning and the end of the earth. With this power in hand, he offers a spring of water that will never run dry. In addition, this water will be free of charge to all the residents of this glorious city. The provisions of God are in abundance and without the strain and stress of the sin fallen world. The promise of verse 7 also presents a challenge for the reader. It is the overcomers who will enjoy and rejoice in the day being described.

Jesus is not only the creator and provider, he is also the judge. Verse 8 is explicit to remind all the earth that not everyone will rest in the splendor of God's presence. While there is bliss and rejoicing in the new city, there is fire and brimstone and the reality of the second death in the lake of fire. The contrast is vivid and the warning strong, not everyone will enter into the kingdom of heaven.

John continues the mixing of metaphors in verse 9 and the description of the bride that follows. This mixing of metaphors makes it difficult to interpret the vision literal as does Hal Lindsey. To use a strict literal interpretation also limits the significance of the symbolism. The metaphor of the bride signifies that the vision is of the church. The church is not a physical building or city but rather the saints of God. On one hand he is describing a gathering of saints; on the other he is using building language to describe a city. No doubt he is describing the work that only God can do in his people.

John is carried away to a mountain which reminds the reader of Moses' call on a mountain. The Scripture often shows God meeting people on the mountain. This is quite the opposite of early visions when John was carried into the desert. Again it is mentioned that as John receives this vision he is in the Spirit reminding the reader this vision is of heavenly origin and John's primary mode of receiving the message is not from normal physical faculties.

The city described in verses 10-22 is called the New Jerusalem. It comes down from heaven which symbolizes God as the builder. Human hands did not build this city. Again John mixes metaphors as he describes this phenomenon as a city in a physical sense yet names the twelve apostles as the foundation stones. The city has twelve gates and each of them has the name of a tribe of Israel inscribed. The mention of both with positions of great importance serves to bring together the Old Testament saints with the New Testament saints as the church. Even though John is describing a physical city, it also clear he is speaking of the church. While the jewels mentioned are physical, there is an indication the city is made up of the saints and the real jewels are the handiwork of God in the lives of individuals.

The description of this city has several striking characteristics. The inclusion of many precious metals and jewels sets this city apart as one of great beauty. The jewels mentioned correlate to those on the ephod worn by the priests in the Old Testament as well as to the zodiac signs. The order John uses to list these jewels is opposite to those in the zodiac. Perhaps this is John's way of distinguishing between pagan ritual and superstition and the truth of God.

A second striking characteristic is the size of the city. Verse 16 points out that the city is as tall as it is wide and long. It is evidently a square cube. Some have speculated it to be a pyramid. Hal Lindsey believes the measurements to be literal with the city ranging to a 1500 mile square. Others see the measurement as symbolizing completeness and a rather large size. The promise to Abraham was for a very large number in his offspring and the size of this city points to the fulfillment of God's promise.

The city has angels guarding the gates symbolizing the protection God is providing to keep evil from the city. Evil will not be allowed into this city which represents heaven. It will be a place where all live under the perfect law of God through a very intimate relationship with Him. Verse 22 records the absence of a temple. The entire city is a sanctuary eliminating the need for a physical structure to separate man from an evil environment. God is the temple. We should not read anything into the idea that God is the temple when man has been called the temple of the Holy Ghost. John is speaking in metaphorical language and again, we should be careful about applying earthly material terminology to the Holy City John was seeking to describe.

A third striking characteristic of the city is the continual light provided by the presence of God and the continually open gates. There is no need for any kind of what we might call artificial lighting because God's presence illuminates the city. One might need to remember that in John's Gospel darkness represents a lack of theological understanding and light represents the truth. Man will see clearly in matters of truth as well as things material. Collected in the city will be the wealth of all the nations. This statement serves to remind all humanity that Jesus is Lord. The judgment has already removed unbelievers to the lake of fire. There seems to be agreement across most scholarly interpretations of Revelation that verse 24 should not be taken in a rigid manner. Even though the city gates will never be closed there is no danger of evil approaching. God has overthrown the enemy and has cast death and hell into the lake of fire. Verse 27 seals this truth in stating those whose names are written in the lamb's book of life are the only ones who have entrance into the city.

A few Bible interpreters have taken the open gates of the city and the description of the nations bringing their wealth into the city to mean that there will remain a land outside the city. Some have even gone so far as to say this outer land will be one where people can decide to live according to God's kingdom rules and then enter. This interpretation struggles to define what it means to be recorded in the lamb's book of life. It also fails to adequately deal with the judgment of chapter 20 and the lake of fire.

It may be difficult to sort out the symbolic from the literal throughout Revelation and chapter 21 in particular, but the message is very clear. There will be no evil in heaven. Only the redeemed that have had their sins washed away by the blood of Christ, those who have been sanctified by the continual work of God will be allowed through the gates of heaven. Now is the time to make your election sure and know that your name is written in the precious book known as the Lamb's Book of Life.