

Reimagining the Church and the City

Revelation 21:1-8

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” **6** And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. **7** The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and she will be my son. **8** But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Sermon Notes

Revelation is composed of four visions, and the vision we read in 21:1-8 is the final one. This vision is of the City of God in its final, perfected state. In theology, we call it the consummated City of God. The stunning and overwhelming joy of this consummated city explains the urgent warnings to repent and passionate pleas to endure which characterize the first three visions. John strains to find analogies to convey the brilliant radiance of that place Christians alone will experience. If an inspired Apostle who was granted a glimpse of heaven could not find human words or earthly images to convey its glory, then we must concede it is beyond the capacities of our imagination. Like John, we will have to be content in the meantime with combining all the greatest images we can, waiting for the day when God will surpass our wildest imaginations.

Besides the Vatican, La Sagrada Familia (The Holy Family) is perhaps the most recognized church structure in the world. The most distinct feature is its eighteen five-hundred-foot-tall spires. Its facades are also unique as they depict the entire Bible, including the works of creation in stunning detail. The interior construction is even more remarkable than the exterior. Standing inside, one feels like he or she is in a forest under a towering canopy of trees. Extraordinarily tall columns branch to bear the enormous weight of the roof, leaving the nave uninterrupted by walls and allowing light to flood the interior from every angle. However, what distinguishes this building as an architectural wonder is that the majority of it was completed after the death of the architect and with no record of his drawings or models.

The architect was Antoni Gaudi from Catalonia whose professor in Barcelona said of him in class one day, “We are either in the presence of a genius or a madman.” Gaudi was picked by the priest Josep Bocabella to build a temple representing God’s plan to create the world in order to build a holy family of Christians. For the next 43 years of his life, Gaudi became consumed with the work. He sensed he would not live to complete it so he made scores of plaster models and drew detailed plans for his successors. In 1926, he was tragically killed. Gaudi had only completed a wall, a tower, the nativity façade, and a crypt. Ten years later, during Spain’s civil war, the Nationalists invaded the church, smashed all his models and burned all the drawings.

For the next twenty years Gaudi’s team of architects struggled to carry on the work but without drawings, models or Gaudi’s genius they could not go forward. In the 1960s a new architectural

grad who worked as an intern on the project decided he would try to use a “new gizmo” called a computer to recreate Gaudi’s plans from what was constructed. He fed the measurements into the architectural software and it blew the computer’s mind. However, he soon found aeronautical software which utilized parametric design, and when he entered the data, the software reproduced what the designer originally imagined. Taking the few clues Gaudi left, the new architects were able to build what the original genius planned.

The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city. As image-bearers of God, we have built cities throughout history, but inevitably, they are marred by the effects of sin. Our text, and others like it in Scripture, gives us more than a few clues of what God’s perfected City will look like. God’s infinite imagination is shared with us in what John Calvin calls his “baby talk.” These passages are his scant drawings and models, but the Holy Spirit is our software. The Holy Spirit is transforming our minds to think like the original designer and the Spirit of Jesus is enabling us physically to begin construction of that coming City now. It is as we pray every week, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, one earth as it is in Heaven.”

Those parts of God’s plan which we successfully build in this world for his glory will be carried forward in the age to come and set up as walls in the City of God. That City will be a whole community. Some of what we are building is physical, like houses of worship and clinics and homes. Some of what we are building are systems, like economic structures and justice systems, and educational programs. Some of what we are building are people whose minds think like Christ, whose hands and feet work like a merciful Savior’s, whose mouths speak truth, and whose bodies fully function as intended.

Let us look through this curtain God pulls back ever so slightly and take a glimpse at his completed masterpiece and reimagine this present broken community we live in as what it will someday be.

I. **Beautifully Joyful (1-2)**

Purged of all remnants of sin from the curses placed on it after the Fall, heaven and earth appear to be totally new and are imbued with permanent joy.

A. Unparalleled Beauty Woos

The tired old creation, subjected to the ravages of our original sin, is liberated from its bondage and freed to perform its original function—to magnify the beautiful relationship between God and his people. When that relationship was broken, God subjected creation to brokenness to mirror our fallenness. The heavens and earth described in our text then will be “new” or “renewed” in sympathy with Christians whose vindication at the Judgment Day will be proven by the resurrection of their perfectly humanized bodies (Ac. 3:21).

I doubt there will be no ocean in heaven. The “sea” that will be absent in the restored creation is that sea from which the beast arose in Revelation 13:1. In Revelation the sea represents the unreliable and ever-changing promises of the dominant culture inspired by the Evil one (Is. 57:20). His kingdom is one of constant dangers and tumult, a divider of nations and churches. In contrast to this image of turmoil, unpredictability, insecurity, filth and ugliness comes a city unparalleled in its harmony and as beautiful as a bejeweled bride.

These images must have broken in on John’s mind in the past as glimpses of heaven. Especially as he was now imprisoned on an island, he must have dreamed of a city like one of the many stunning ancient cities. For instance, listen to this description of Alexandria as she appeared in 331 B.C.

Alexandria's ninety-foot-wide main avenue left visitors speechless, its scale unmatched in the ancient world. You could lose a day exploring it from end to end. Lines with delicately carved columns, silk awnings, and richly painted facades, the Canopic Way could accommodate eight chariots driving abreast. The city's primary side streets too were nearly twenty feet wide, paved with stones, expertly drained, and partially lit at night. From its central crossroads—a ten minute walk from the palace—a forest of sparkling limestone colonnades extended as far as the eye could see. . . . Industry divided the neighborhoods as well: one quarter was devoted to the manufacture of perfumes and to the fabrication of their alabaster pots, another to glassworkers. . . . Altogether it was a mood-altering city of extreme sensuality and high intellectualism, the Paris of the ancient world.

Apart from all human companionship, John also reached into his mind for the most dramatic image of beauty in his culture. Roman wives were famous for their extravagant attire and jewelry especially on their wedding day. Evidence of their decoration has been unearthed in the ruins of the ancient city Pompeii suddenly buried by a volcano in AD 79. Roman women decked themselves in gold literally from head to toe. Archaeologists have excavated gold hair braids, earrings, necklaces, upper armbands, forearm bands, wristbands, rings, belts, anklets, and gold toe rings. Many of these were additionally decorated with pearls, emeralds, and other precious stones.

This beautiful, bride-like imagery is revealed by our Bridegroom Jesus who woos us home, inspiring us to say “no” to all competing loves.

B. Unending Joy Entices

God gives his children occasional glimpses of the perfect harmony of heaven. Sometimes he bursts into our broken world with a flashing revelation of the peace and beauty the heavenly city will bring. He even provides these for unbelievers in order to draw them to himself. Aware of this phenomenon, the British Romantic poets tried in vain to recreate these experiences by returning to the places where they had the encounters, whether it was while looking at an ancient ruin or while drifting on a lake or cowering from a storm. C.S. Lewis called what he sought to recapture since he was a boy, “Joy.”

Through the years I've kept in my memory a collection of such experiences that encourage me to long for heaven. I relate them only to stir you to look for God's performing the same kindness for you. One was on my first bike ride by myself from the neighborhood pool to my home when I was struck with a thought that no one had taught me—there is a God very near to me who loves me and will kindly direct all the rest of my days. A little later as a middle schooler, God dramatically healed me of clinical depression. Then there was the moment I read in a small book that God loved the whole creation and called us to participate with him in redeeming every area of life. In college, it was sharing a slice of French Silk pie with Jackie at Vine Street Café for our first date. The next year there was that afternoon walking back from class when God sealed to my heart that he loved me as a son. The next was our wedding day. Next it was the night I was ordained. It was upon the birth of each child. It was at the first service in our new sanctuary in St. Louis. It was during “How Deep the Father's Love for Us” at a Good Friday service in 2001. It was the Good Friday service 2012. New members spreading from one side of the old First Pres sanctuary to the other, half black and half white. My installation at Second Pres.

As you keep record of your own foretastes of unending joy, you will be enticed only by the heavenly banquet; all lesser tastes of things not found there will no longer satisfy.

II. Gloriously Diverse (3)

It is called the New Jerusalem in order to emphasize we will live together in perfect community. “It symbolizes the eternal felicity of all who follow the Lamb.”

Superior manuscript evidence supports translating v. 3 as, “they shall be his peoples”; a clever rendering of the singular “people” in the Old Testament (Jer. 7:23; 30:22; Hos. 2:23). John’s emphasis on representation from every ethnicity on the earth would necessitate this emendation. It is safe then to say that a Christian’s impulse should be to move physically toward those who are of a different class, skin color, and nationality.

We need not only rely on the translation of people vs. peoples, however; John has already told us God’s completed Church will be multiethnic, a numberless host from every tribe, tongue, people and nation in Revelation 7:9.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands

In fact, passages such as this that describe God’s City as one characterized by glorious diversity form the “spine” of the entire book of Revelation.

John also tells us in Revelation 13 that Satan opposes Christ’s mission to bring unity in diversity. The Antichrist does the most grotesque opposite of everything the Lamb does so beautifully. While Christ only speaks truth, Satan’s forces “deceive” (13:14). While those who know Christ worship him with spontaneous joy, Satan’s forces must force their subjects to pay homage (13:14). While Christ gives life to believers, Satan’s forces kill their followers (13:15). While Christ sets free from bondage, Satan’s forces enslave (13:16). Given that Satan’s ways are always anti-Christ, it stands to reason that if he is given temporary power in this world among “every tribe, people, language and nation” (13:7), he uses it to separate and create hate among the various peoples. For any community to become mono-cultural (any one ethnicity) and predominantly one social class (either poor or rich) is to become potentially an outpost of the anti-Christ.

A. Diverse Community Silences

Any community of diverse Christian people living in harmony silences those who attack Christianity because it ultimately proves the infinite un-remarkability of the devil’s agenda. Lucifer’s sin was to think he was to view himself as superior because he thought his appearance was more beautiful. Therefore, he aspired to make himself and those who looked like him the ruling class of the universe. Paul said that the mystery of the Gospel is that parties previously thought to be irreconcilable will be melded into a new humanity regarding one another as brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers (Ep. 3:7). Anything less than different ethnicities living and worshiping with one another in community, Paul said, was a “condemned” practice, even if it was that of the great apostle Peter (Ga. 2:11). Our practices as Christians are to be remarkable. Our righteousness, Jesus said, must surpass that of the Pharisees who love only those who take no effort to love. It is natural and ordinary only to hang out with those who look, act, spend, vacation, talk and worship just like you. We are called to live by a power that is mysterious to the unregenerated mind.

B. Diverse Community Reveals

We could argue from this passage that the more exclusive and monolithic your “community” is the more distant is God’s presence from it. Diverse community reveals the glorious image of God. So said the great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921):

The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be. It can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members. Just as the traces of God (vestigia Dei) are spread over

many, many works, in both space and time, so also the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side. But just as the cosmos is a unity and receives its head and master in humankind; and just as the traces of God (vestigia Dei) scattered throughout the entire world are bundled and raised up into the image of God of humankind; so also that humanity in turn is to be conceived as an organism that, precisely as such, is finally the only fully developed image of God. Not as a heap of souls on a tract of land, not as a loose aggregate of individuals, but as having been created out of one blood; as one household and one family, humanity is the image and likeness of God. Belonging to that humanity is also its development, its history, its ever-expanding dominion over the earth, its progress in science and art, its subjugation of all creatures. All these things as well constitute the unfolding of the image and likeness of God in keeping with which humanity was created. Just as God did not reveal himself all at once at the creation, but continues and expands that revelation from day to day and from age to age, so also the image of God is not a static entity but extends and unfolds itself in the forms of space and time. It is both a gift (Gabe) and a mandate (Aufgabe). It is an undeserved gift of grace that was given to the first human being immediately at the creation but at the same time is the grounding principle and germ of an altogether rich and glorious development. Only humanity in its entirety—as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation—only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God.

This is one of the few times in Revelation, John records God's speaking directly. So what does God choose to say in this rare speech? That he will "dwell" among his people or peoples. The word translated "dwell" is skene and literally means to "tabernacle" (cf. Jn. 1:14). It is closely related to the Hebrew word Shekinah, which referred to the glory of God's presence among his people, usually in the form of a cloud or a pillar of fire. We could safely infer then that God is most glorified when his people are gathered as a community of diverse ages, socio-economic status, skin color and ethnicity. The more monolithic, gated, exclusive, comfortable, monochromatic, xenophobic, chauvinistic, and nationalistic your gatherings the farther away God is from them and the less testimony they give to the coming New Jerusalem. There are no cliques in the Kingdom of God, either on this side or that side of heaven.

III. Generously Restored (4-6)

The third characteristic of heaven is the generous restoration of everything causing human beings to flourish.

A. Guaranteed Restoration Fortifies

In verses 4-6 we see the description of things that we could never imagine. They are beyond what the original Garden of Eden was. This is in keeping with God's grace, which is so magnificent that when he restores us, he restores us to a position that is better than it was before. Because of God's grace in uniting us into the stability of his own kingdom through Christ, we are in a better position than Adam was before the Fall.

Alluding to Isaiah's vision of heaven, John says God will make all things in heaven and earth "new" in order that every element will only make us flourish. Nothing will diminish our full enjoyment of God or life or each other for eternity. God will provide respite from all trials (Is. 25:8). He will replace every form of mourning with joy (Is. 35:10; 51:11). There will only be safety, no danger (Is. 51:10). There will be no remnant of the curse, only blessing (Is. 65:17).

All of these promises are based on the utter reliability of God who is "trustworthy and true." This City is anchored in the ultimately, infallibly stable character of God in Jesus Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega.

B. Generous Restoration Produces

The best news of all is that heaven is a free gift. You cannot earn it and you will never deserve it. All you can do is receive it by committing your life to Jesus Christ and receiving the righteousness he earned for you in his life and death. However, we must not be guilty of merely waiting for heaven or merely telling others about how great it will be. Those indwelt by Christ and enraptured by this glorious future will find themselves witnessing to others about it by bringing aspects of it to bear on life in the present. By faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit a Christian is able to reach into the future blessings of heaven and bring parts of it to life in this world.

IV. Victoriously Empowered (7-8)

The last characteristic of the New Heaven and Earth is that it will only be populated by those who finished their lives devoted to Jesus Christ.

A. Conditionality Warns

Numerous times in chapters 2 and 3, Jesus warns that the inheritance of heaven will be offered only to those who “persevere to the end” or “overcome.” The promises held out to such overcomers include “the tree of life which is in the paradise of God’ (2:7; 22:2), inclusion in the new temple (3:12; 21:22ff.), participation in ‘the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God’ (3:12; 21:2, 10), the name of God on one’s person (3:12; 22:4), one’s ‘name written in the book of life’ (3:5; 21:27), bright garments (3:5; 21:2, 9ff.; cf. 19:7–8), a bright stone and a luminary (2:17, 28; 21:11, 18–21, 23; 22:5, 16), consummate reigning with Christ (2:26–27; 3:21; 22:5), and exclusion from the ‘second death’ (2:11; 21:7–8).”

Of course John is writing to believers who are being threatened with deprivation of all the essentials of life unless they compromise, blend-in, and at least act like they are worshiping the Emperor. So Jesus assures those who persevere in following him that he will provide everything they need (security, home, power, food, clothing, and a name). That provision in this life may be temporary and minimal here but it will be eternal and inexhaustible in heaven. Behind each of these promises is one promise, “I will be with you.” Therefore, “the one who overcomes inherits these things” because he is finally with Christ in person. That is, the only way to receive any of these blessings is to be near Jesus and the only way to inherit them permanently is to battle through this life with him and get to the other side where he is.

B. Promise Empowers

The promise, however, also includes the power. Notice John says to us corporately that we will be a “son” to him. The only way we will persevere is by being united to him who alone has perfectly overcome. While the promise of God’s presence in v. 7 is similar to that in v. 3, it is profoundly different. Rather than promising his presence with the peoples, here God promises to be with his “son.” The reason is that this promise was made in 2 Samuel 7:14 through David to a Son yet to come. David’s Greater Son would reign forever over those nations given to him by the Father as an inheritance (Ps. 2:7; He. 1:2–5). So why does John include this prophecy regarding Jesus Christ as a motivation to suffering Christians to overcome? Because this is the secret to their overcoming! He does not tell us to work up more courage or think more positively or discipline ourselves to be more holy. He tells us to stay close to Jesus because he is our only hope for finishing well. Because we are in Christ (1:9), in the Son, we will receive his inheritance with him. We have already this individual fulfillment of God’s conditions by Christ that in turn benefit us (Ps. 2:8–9, 26–27). Without compromising his uniqueness as God’s only Son, Christ enables us to inherit all of the privileges of his Sonship. The only reason any of us will be in God’s City is because we persevere and overcome. And the only reason we persevere and overcome is because the Son has.

You and I will succeed in this work of city-building, not because of our resources. We will succeed because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, with whom we are united.

Just north of Savannah, Georgia is a small town called New Ebenezer. It was founded in the 1700s by the Salzburger. They were Lutherans from Salzburg, Germany who came in response to an offer from General Oglethorpe that he would give free land to any Europeans who would come and set up villages.

They came for the free land and they began to set up their village. The very first building they decided to build was the church. They built temporary houses for themselves, but they wanted the church to be the most beautiful and most elegant architectural statement in their village. So they set to work making bricks. Over the course of time, however, the ravages of disease and Native Americans who did not appreciate someone else coming on to their land wiped out all of the adults. The children, however, survived. They also continued building the church their parents had started. The little girls continued to bake the bricks. The little boys continued to spread the mortar and stack the bricks, one on top of another, until they completed the church. Even today, that church still stands and you can still see impressions of the tiny handprints that built that church.

Our gracious father could have chosen much more efficient ways to build his city, but because he wants to include us in the never-ending joy of the completed project, he takes us in and he uses our little hands and our little resources right now to start building that city which is to come. Somehow, he will preserve our tiny handprints and remember them into all eternity when he says to us, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Here is our joy - to retell the gospel every day and in every ministry even as we reimagine that city which is to come and begin even now realizing it in this church and in this city.