

Lesson 9: Revelation 21

Opening Question: Where is one of the most beautiful places you have ever been?

Opening Prayer: Earthly beauty creates in us a longing for heavenly beauty, Lord. Open our eyes each day to the beauty surrounding us, so that our hearts are regularly drawn toward the new heaven and the new earth. Amen!

Read aloud Revelation 21:1-8; 22-27

Read Wright:

So many Christians have read John's book expecting that the final scene will be a picture of 'heaven' that they fail completely to see the full glory of what he is saying. Plato was wrong. It isn't a matter – it wasn't ever a matter – of 'heaven' being the perfect world to which we shall (perhaps) go one day, and 'earth' being the shabby, second-rate temporary dwelling from which we shall be glad to depart for good. As we have seen throughout the book, 'earth' is a glorious part of God's glorious creation, and 'heaven', though God's own abode, is also the place where the 'sea' stands as a reminder of the power of evil, so much so that at one point there is 'war in heaven'. God's two-level world needs renewing in both its elements.

But when that is done, we are left not with a new heaven only, but a new heaven and a new earth – and they are joined together completely and forever. The word 'dwell' in verse 3 is crucial, because the word John uses conjures up the idea of God 'dwelling' in the Temple in Jerusalem, revealing his glory in the midst of his people. This is what John's gospel says about Jesus: the Word became flesh and lived, 'dwelt', pitched his tent, 'tabernacled', in our midst, and we gazed upon his glory. What God did in Jesus, coming to an unknowing world and an unwelcoming people, he is doing on a cosmic scale. He is coming to live, forever, in our midst, a healing, comforting, celebrating presence. And the idea of 'incarnation', so long a key topic in our thinking about Jesus, is revealed as the key topic in our thinking about God's future for the world. Heaven and earth were joined together in Jesus; heaven and earth will one day be joined fully and forever. Paul says exactly the same thing in Ephesians 1.10 (187-188).

The new world, in other words, will be like the present one in the sense of its being a world full of beauty, power, delight, tenderness and glory. In this new world, for instance, the temple, which was properly there in heaven as well as on earth (11.19), will be abolished (21.22); not because it was a stupid idea for God to dwell among his people, but because the Temple was the advance model of God's great hidden plan for the whole cosmos, now at last to be realized. The new world will be like the present

one, but without all those features, particularly death, tears and everything that causes them, which make the present world what it is.

That is what is meant by there being 'no more sea'. Throughout this book, as in much of the Bible, the sea is the dark force of chaos which threatens God's plans and God's people. It is the element from which the first monster emerged. It is contained in the first heaven, 'contained', that is, both in the sense that it is there as part of the furniture and in the sense that its boundary is strictly limited. Evil is only allowed to do enough to overreach itself and to bring about its own downfall. But in the new creation there will be no more sea, no more chaos, no place from which monsters might again emerge.

The center of the picture, though, is not, or not yet, the new world itself, but the one true God who made the first creation and loved it so much that he sent the lamb to redeem and renew it. Up to now, 'the one who sits on the throne' has been mentioned only obliquely. He has been there; he has been worshipped; but all the talking has been done by Jesus, or by an angel, or by 'a voice from heaven'. Now, at last, for the first time since the opening statement in 1.8, God himself addresses John, and through him addresses his churches and ours. This personal address by God himself is, it seems, part of the newness, just as in verse 4 God himself 'will wipe away every tear from their eyes', an act of utter gentleness and kindness to be performed not by some junior heavenly official but by God himself. Through this is a revelation of God's eternal character, most of us, contemplating this wonderful prospect, will feel a whole new world opening up before us (189-190).

It thus appears that the new Jerusalem, in John's vision, is the whole of the new creation. It is the centerpiece and glory of it, the fountain from which there flows freely all that the world could need. It is the holy of holies, but actually the whole earth is to be full of God's glory, is to be the ultimate temple. This is what is meant when John describes the servants of God and the lamb not only worshipping (verse 3), not only seeing his face (verse 4), but also reigning 'for ever and ever' (verse 5). From the start of the book we were told that the lamb's followers were to be a royal priesthood, and now we see what this means. It is from the city, the city which is the bride, the bride which is the lamb's followers, that healing, restorative stewardship is to flow. This is how the creator God will show, once and for all, that his creation was good, and that he himself is full of mercy.

John's vision, then, is of a new Eden; but it is a city, not simply a garden. All the elements of the garden are still there, but enshrined and enhanced within and around the city. We know in our bones that we were made for both, though the romantic idyll of the countryside on the one hand and the developers' dream of the city on the other hand both routinely fail to hit the mark. The new creation, drawing the double vision together, transforms and heals both. As heaven and earth come together, as the bride

and the lamb come together - both of them signs that the dualities in Genesis are at last united, as was always intended - so the garden and the city come together as well. Humans, in community with one another and with God, are to exercise their delighted and wise stewardship over the earth and its fruits, in the glorious light that comes from the throne. Like other aspects of this vision of the ultimate future, this, too, is to be anticipated in the present (200-201).

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. What delights you about visiting large cities?
2. What delights you about visiting natural places—national parks, Lake Michigan, the Rockies?
3. How can we anticipate and work for the new heaven and the new earth in both of these places?

Closing Prayer, from the hymn “When Peace Like a River”:

O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight;
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll.
The trump shall resound,
and the Lord shall descend!
Even so, it is well with my soul.
Amen.