

“The New Jerusalem”

Introduction: I’m sure many of you remember the historic 2004 season of the Boston Red Sox. In particular, I’m sure you remember pretty much giving up when the Sox went down 3-0 to those evil New York Yankees. Of course, that’s now it ended. The Sox “reversed the curse,” as it was declared, and won their first World Series in 86 years. A DVD was produced to chronicle that historic season; it was called *Faith Rewarded*. One of the interesting things about going back and watching that DVD is that, when the Sox go down 3-0 to the Yankees, you’re not nearly as tempted to give up as you were ten years ago! Having some sense of what the future holds greatly helps us to persevere through trials in the present.

The closing chapters in the vision that is Revelation seek to make much the same point. Written to churches in the first century who were tempted to either give up, or compromise, their faith, due to persecution or societal pressure, Revelation begins with a promise to each of these seven churches, beginning with the refrain, “To the one who is victorious (or overcomes, or conquers)…” Then, at the end of the book, it’s as if all of these promises are summed up in a description of the New Jerusalem: “Those who are victorious will inherit all this…” (21:7).

We began last week, and this morning we want continue, to explore what the “all this” entails. As Psalm 48 has it, we want to walk about this “city of the Great King…counting her towers, considering well her ramparts, and viewing her citadels,” so that we can have a better sense of the future inheritance that awaits us and so to persevere and more faithfully live in the present, especially when tempted to give up or compromise in some fashion.

Remember that the final six chapters (17-22) highlight a contrast and choice, one that will lead either to victory or defeat. On the one hand, one can compromise and head toward Babylon, the “mother of prostitutes,” as John identifies her (17:5). As we saw last week, she represents a way of life that seems, on the surface, to be attractive, alluring, and easy. But when we begin to see her for who she really is, she represents a life that is materialistic, self-centered, immoral, and unjust. In the end, she will neither last nor satisfy; she will be judged and destroyed. So, don’t throw your lot in with her, John warns. It will only lead to defeat.

The path that leads to victory is the one that leads toward the New Jerusalem which, as we began to see toward the end last week, in contrast to the prostitute, is a place where we will find not a transaction but a relationship, we will find a suitor in the Lamb who was slain who has died for us and will be faithful to us for an eternity, and we will find one who empowers us to live a life that is truly life. If we’re to steer a course away from Babylon, we need this vision of the New Jerusalem. We need a goal that is far more attractive and satisfying than what Babylon offers.

A helpful way to continue to poke around and examine what awaits us is to observe what is absent from this city and what is present.

I. What Is Absent in the City

A. What is absent in the New Jerusalem is all which opposes God and diminishes life.

1. And so the first thing we are called to notice is the absence of any sea (v. 1). Is John saying there will be no fishing or boating in God’s new creation? Fortunately, I don’t think so! Rather, the sea represents the forces of chaos. It is the place from which the beast was seen to come

(13:1). In God's first creation, the sea was pictured as contained by God's sovereignty; it sat at the foot of God's throne (4:6). But in his new creation, it will be absent all together. The forces that threaten God's plans and God's people will be gone forever. There will be no place from which monsters can emerge. From earthquakes and typhoons, to mad gunmen and terrorists, they will all be no more.

2. Second, in God's new creation, without the forces of chaos present, the emotions that tear us apart will also be absent. That is, "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (v. 4). All of us have experienced each of these things. No matter how educated or technologically advanced we've become, there is no getting around these experiences. But no more, for that which causes from death to pain will be gone.

3. Third, the character, and characters, which live in opposition to God's kingdom values, will be gone. Those who will not inherit what the New Jerusalem offers include "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars" (v. 8). Now, if we take a close look at this list, we will soon realize that no one is immune from judgment. The line between justice and injustice, between things that are right and things that are wrong, cannot be drawn between "us and them." Rather, it runs right down the middle of each one of "us." But the warning does not mean that the New Jerusalem; God's great city, is reserved only for those who have never sinned. Rather, it means that there is no room for those who want nothing to do with God's presence or his way; they want nothing to do with God and so they will end up in a place where God is not (cf. 2 Thess. 1:8-10). The New Jerusalem, on the other hand, is reserved, instead, for those who are willing to repent and be cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city" (22:14). Truly no one deserves to live in this city. We enter it by, and only by, the grace of God, who, through Jesus, washes us and makes us new. Naming what will not be present is one way that God moves people to repent of their sin, put their trust in his Son, and persevere in their walk of faith.

4. Fourth, and perhaps the most striking absence, is that there is no temple. John looked down every street and alleyway and this is what he said, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (v. 22). Now this is striking for the temple had been the unique, special place of God's presence, the appointed place to which he drew his people for communion with him. The prophet Ezekiel spilled a lot of ink describing what the future and restored temple would look like (chs. 40-48). But John sees no such structure in the New Jerusalem, because, as he describes it, the whole city is the structure, the whole city is filled with God's immediate presence. It's as if all the features of the temple described by Ezekiel have been transferred to this city of the great King.

The most intriguing sign of this is seen when John watches the angel who has been speaking to him measure the city (vv. 15-21). It is laid out in a square, John observes, as long as it was wide. The measuring device the angel used showed that its dimensions were about 1,400 miles square, which is a pretty big city (1,400 miles being the distance, roughly, from Boston to K.C.)! But that's not the most amazing feature. As John looks on, he notices that the city is also 1,400 miles *high*! What do we have here? Well, rather than try to imagine how a skyscraper could be built in that environment, better to see, once again, the numbers as symbolic and what they reveal is a perfect cube. For John's readers, a perfect cube would have described only thing: the Holy of Holies that was the inner most part of temple, that part where God's presence was believed to be most acutely. Thus, the new city, the New Jerusalem, God's new creation, is not only all temple, it is all the Holy of Holies! There is no specific, stand-alone structure because God is immediately and everywhere present.

II. What Is Present in the City

A. This leads us naturally to consider what is present in the city.

1. The first thing we notice is God himself. “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them” (v. 3). The word “dwell” here means to pitch one’s tent, or “tabernacle” among. It refers back to how God had been with his people Israel through the portable temple, or tabernacle that they carried with them. It describes as well the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh. who, John says in his gospel account, was God making “his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:14). So the picture is that what God did in Israel, and then in Jesus, in a particular time and place, he will now do on a cosmic, permanent scale. This will happen because the New Jerusalem will be a coming together of God’s dimension of reality (heaven) and ours (earth). We don’t escape earth in order to go to heaven; heaven is pictured as coming down to join us, removing the separation between the two dimensions and giving us the wonder and beauty and glory of God full on and forevermore! It’s a glorious presence that is accentuated by all the precious gems and jewels that are pictured as shining throughout the city.

2. Also present in the New Jerusalem is an amazing community of people. So John sees the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on the city’s gates and the twelve apostles on its foundation. The various nations, and the kings of the earth, will be present. Together it all represents a vast, multi-cultural community of faith, to which ancient Israel, and then the church, pointed as its fulfillment. Thus the New Jerusalem is not the property of any one people group, but is shared by people from every tribe, language, and nation who call on the name of Jesus. What a wonderfully rich community that will be!

3. Third, in addition to God and lots of different kinds of people, the New Jerusalem will have “stuff.” That’s not a very theological term, but it’s meant to convey that in his new creation, God is not wiping out the old, but renewing, redeeming, and transforming it. He is not making all new things, but all things new (v. 5). And so we see walls and gates and streets, we see gems and stones, and we see trees that bear fruit and a river. It’s like the original Garden of Eden has been expanded and intensified and so, because there will be lots of material stuff in this garden-like city, we will still have a job to do. So, in 22:5, we read that not only God, but we, will “reign for ever and ever.” We will reign with God, in other words, exercising dominion over the new order in the right and proper way, and there will be room for incredible creativity. As Dallas Willard imagines:

We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join the eternal Logos, “reign with him,” in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. . . .A place in God’s creative order has been reserved for each one of us. [*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 378]

What is painted for us here is a picture of a faith that will be rewarded, of a future so full of beauty and goodness that it is hard to absorb, though we do get glimpses of it now, from time to time. As C.S. Lewis once put it, “The leaves of the NT rustle with the rumor that the glory of nature is only the first sketch of a greater glory to come.” And so, anticipating this greater glory, and the invitation of God to join him in it, may we keep this picture in front of us, especially at those moments when our faith is inclined to waver. May we know that the outcome of our faith, that our perseverance in the faith, means that we will inherit “all this.” Above all, may we trust that the God who began a good work in us will keep walking alongside us, bringing what he began to its glorious completion.