

Getting Started:

What's transpired between John's ascending into God's throne room (Rev 4/5) and Heaven's coming down (Rev 21/22) has been a challenge to navigate. For 15 chapters God has reversed creation, defeated his enemies and dealt decisively with those who have harmed his people. How shall we evaluate the long journey through a seemingly endless wilderness?

G. B. Caird observes,

"All through the long story of God's assault on the old corrupt order there have been intimations of immortality: the promises to the conquerors, the white robed multitude, the triumph song of Moses and the Lamb, the wedding feast of the Lamb and his bride. The clouds of glory have hung low over the camp of the true Israel in their wilderness wanderings. Now at last John stands on Pisgah and surveys the Promised Land. In some ways this is the most important part of his book, as it is certainly the most familiar and beloved. 'If only we knew', the martyrs have cried, 'where it is all going to end!'; and much of John's vision, and much of the human history it depicts and interprets, becomes intelligible, credible, tolerable, when we know the answer. Here is the real source of John's prophetic certainty, for only in comparison with the New Jerusalem can the queenly splendours of Babylon be recognized as the seductive gauds of an old and raddled whore."

Just as Ch. 17-19 have been "a tale of two women" (the whore/the bride), so these last chapters are also a tale of two cities (Babylon and the New Jerusalem). Babylon, and its present manifestation, Rome, may seem splendid in AD 95, but when set side by side with the New Jerusalem the contrast could not be starker.

The New Jerusalem is everything Babylon isn't. There is here an unprecedented openness, security, and freedom. What a contrast to Babylon as John describes it (ch 18). Babylon is a festering cesspool of evil. John says, ". . . a dwelling place of demons and a prison for every unclean spirit, and a prison for every unclean and hateful bird" (18:2, 3).

And with human power structures now dealt with, and the dragon, evil, and the unrepentant dealt with, there is only one matter left to unveil – heaven on earth, the New Jerusalem.

The Core:

21:1-9 The New Creation

All renovations usually involve a messy endless teardown process. But, thankfully, the point comes where the dust, dirt, and scrap produced in removal gives way to something new. What comes down out of heaven is new and magnificent. Using Isa 65 as a backdrop, John proceeds to describe the new celestial city Jerusalem.

In the midst of all the newness, John highlights the absence of "any sea". Why?

In the Scriptures the sea represents a variety of negative images that require taming or subduing. It is a place of evil and chaos (Psa 73:12-17; Job 7:12; 26:13; Isa 27:1), the place of the dead (Rev 20:13), the realm of the antichrist (Rev 13:1).

This portion also mentions the absence of those who oppose God including "cowards".

But who are these people? One might speculate timid Christians, but

“the real cowards in this book are those who went along with the Beast, accepted his mark, and turned to worshipping him. Many of them probably knew in their hearts that this was not the truth, but lacked the courage (because of fear of persecution) to stand up to him. But there is no reason to think they ever made a profession for Christ.” (Paul Tanner)

If, however, by the “cowardly” John means believers who shrink away from faithfulness to the gospel of Christ in order to save their skin we must exercise caution in how we think about this. It’s easy to conclude that if a believer has ever committed spiritual cowardice in the face of trouble their place in God’s kingdom is to be erased. If this were the case the apostle Peter would then be a prime example of a believer headed for the lake of fire because of his denial of Jesus in the courtyard while Jesus was being tried (Matt. 26:69-75). Peter was certainly a coward in the courtyard, but his cowardice wasn’t his settled approach to life.

I appreciate Charles Ryrie’s caution on this point,

Notice that the text does not say that anyone who has ever committed any of these sins will be excluded, but people whose lives are characterized in these ways. There is a difference, between occurrences of lying in one’s life and living a liar’s lifestyle.

The New Jerusalem is everything the present world is not. It is like a bride prepared for her husband (V.2). And in it is a complete absence of sorrow and mourning, pain, and crying. Everything that occupies the cities they are familiar with are also gone (V.8). There is something radically different about this place. This is a city “from God” (V.2). Rome cannot compete with God’s city. Here is why God’s people are intoned to remain faithful and not to become enamoured with Babylon (Rome).

But which city are the churches clamoring for? For Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, and Laodicea, this would be a good time to make critical comparisons and decisions. They’ve been consorting with a whore whose precincts have been filled with all manner of disgusting things. But God’s city will have none of these features (V.8). Revelation 21 encourages the churches to do some serious soul searching.

21:10-27 The Focus on Jerusalem/People/cubes/twelves

Having been given a general overview of the new creation, John is now taken to see the Holy city in detail. It has the “glory of God” resident in it (V.11). What many readers miss is the last words of V.9, “Come here and I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

One would think a literal physical city is in view. However, as Bruce Metzger point out,

“the beloved community (the church) is portrayed as both bride (21:9) and city (21:10-14). In the following description of the city and its magnificence, therefore, the author presents at the same time a vision of heaven in a tapestry of symbolism that describes the church triumphant in its perfected glory”.

Observe as well that what John describes here is a perfect cube (21:16). Why a cube?

“In ancient times the cube was held to be the most perfect of all geometric forms.” (Metzger)

Added to this is vv.12-14. Here the number 12 is repeated in a variety of ways. **How many ways does John use the number 12? What does this mean?**

This could very well represent the totality of the Old and New Testament people of God. Something that Revelation has been working at since the beginning.

As well, this city has no temple, no sun, no moon, and its gates will never close, and there is nothing unclean in it (V.22-27). It has no need of anything that was previously created because God and the Lamb are its temple, and the glory of God illumines it and its Lamp is the Lamb. And all the nations obey God and walk by his light.

City dimensions:

The city is a perfect cube. 1500 miles is comparable to traveling from Winkler to Vancouver. Think about a city like this 1500 miles high, wide, and deep. The New Jerusalem is truly a city without equal.

22:1-5 The Garden/City

Ch 22 adds not only dimension and preciousness to this New Jerusalem, it also features elements that take us back, in a sense, to The Garden of Eden. Here there's a river, trees that bear fruit, and no curse. Also repeated here from Ch 21 is that both the sun and moon are absent and unnecessary because God is in the midst of it and among these people. Consider also, God's bondservants will have an exalted place of service in the presence of God and, "they will reign forever and ever." (22:5).

Christ came as a servant. He emptied himself, Paul says, taking on the form of a man and a bondservant (Phil 2:1-11). The exaltation of Christ did not come until he had experienced the cross and the resurrection. Our vindication does not come here but in eternity. Our ruling ability does not come here, but in eternity. Here we rule by conquering sin through the power of Christ in us as we serve the King of Kings obediently, faithfully, and humbly.

The Tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Beyond all this is the re-emergence of the tree of life (22:2). The last time it was present was in the original Garden (Gen 3:22). It was the one tree that God specifically protected by expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden so that Adam, "might not stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." Here access is unrestricted. Notice as well that in the New Jerusalem there is no tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This tree that caused Adam and Eve so much grief is now completely absent.

22:6-21 The Epilogue

Vs. 6-9 are interesting because if read carefully they remind us of how John began this letter. Many phrases here are also found in Rev 1:1-3. Revelation ends as it began, with a call to the

churches to pay attention. Obviously because the word “heed” occurs more than once here, this is a key concept John wants the churches to notice. Revelation is a book of response. Unlike our modern approaches to Revelation which usually feature speculation about the future, John intended not for the churches to speculate, but rather to respond by acting. The concluding verses of this book give us three practical ways we can respond to God.

V.9 Worship God

In one way or another this is what the whole letter boils down to. And it is the most significant thing a follower of Christ can do. But worship can be misdirected. Therefore we must pay particular attention to the object of our worship. Worship God because of who he is, and what he’s done. Listen to Jesus his Son because of who he is, what he’s done. This is the second time John is redirected in his worship. In 19:10 and here again in V.8-9 John wants to fall at the feet of the angel to worship and is told not to do that. The angel is a fellow servant, not an object of worship.

As we have said, to worship God is to serve him and to serve him is to worship him. In this sense worship and service are not words restricted to specific places like a church sanctuary. Although worship certainly occurs in a sanctuary, John intends a much wider field of application. The churches are to worship and serve God publically, undivided, and unreserved in all venues of life in Asia Minor in AD 95. This is no less true of us today.

V.10-15 Practice Righteousness/Holiness

Here John sums up the core of worshipful living and service for God’s people. Since Revelation is a document for the churches and not the world per se, John is diligent to make sure they know this is a letter they must pay attention to. Yet some will not. Practicing righteousness is how we worship God and is not as difficult as one might think. Yet in a sin broken world it continues as one of our most challenging struggles. Righteousness is simply doing what’s right. What is right is what God has revealed in his word for his people. For the most part we know what to do, but our flesh is weak. We are more like our first parents than we think.

What is V.11 saying? John is saying, let people do whatever they want, but you know what to do, so do it. This passage isn’t permitting believer’s to do whatever they want. Rather it’s an acknowledgement that not all will listen to the truth. Some will listen, some won’t. But it must be remembered that Jesus is coming (V.12) and he will reward each one according to their contribution/witness. I like what Dr. Ed Neufeld says here,

“Jesus now talks directly to the churches in Asia. This message is from him to them. Very direct. Jesus cuts through the intermediaries, angels, and John, and speaks straight to them.”

As such there is an encouragement to blessing (V.14). That blessing is found in washing one’s robes. These folks are already saved people and their persevering, their pressing on, is how their faith is refined and matured. Those outside do not have this. And so God’s people are

intoned to continue to persevere in passionate faithfulness and to avoid the dogs, sorcerers, and others who are outside opposing God.

Not infrequently Christians become weary of doing good, of doing the right thing. Faithfulness doesn't seem to bring the results we would like. And the world attempts to tell us that for all our good intentions it might be just as well to slide along with the rest of the world's approach to living. Christians must not however be lulled into thinking that doing the right thing goes unnoticed, especially by God. We are mindful that we are dressed in robes that are fitting us for life in eternity, and by washing our robes, we seek to make sure that they remain unstained. I can well imagine that the church at Sardis found this portion of Revelation a little hard to come to terms with.

V.16-21 Listen carefully

Jesus continues to speak directly to the churches reminding them to listen. The words of Revelation are from him to the churches, and because of who he is, these words must be given special attention. **What warnings does Christ give to the churches about handling this book?** No one is to change or water down what he has said. In other words let the Revelation have its full authoritative impact. Attempting to alter its words so as to make them less than they mean brings severe consequences. One can imagine that the compromising churches were prone to lessening the impact of what Jesus is communicating. Interestingly, the letter began with identifying its intended audience, the church, and now here at the end they are once again identified and highlighted (V.16). There can be no question that the churches are the audience in mind and that they are called to pay attention to the whole of Revelation as their responsibility to respond to.

Making it real:

Vision

One intended purpose for all we read in ch 21 is to present to the churches God's vision of the place his people will live and what they will be. No human city can compare. So why spend so much effort attempting to blend in with a city that will never compare in splendour to the one God is preparing. If the churches are thinking straightly, you would expect them to run toward God and away from what Rome offers. But this is not always as easily done as said.

Think for a moment of the vision that lies before us. We are often simply told that believers will go to heaven to be with the Lord without significant detail about the place we will be. Rev 21, 22 probably gives us as detailed a picture as we will get, or need. If this is the splendour of what we shall inhabit. There is excellent incentive for us to remain faithful no matter what we face in life. We certainly work diligently to prepare our retirement years. What about eternity which will be endless.

Action

Revelation's concluding words give the churches no "wobble room" in their response. These words are to be taken seriously and acted on intentionally.

In view of what is to come, each of the seven churches have before them a revealed mandate and that is to remain passionately faithful in the present. You know you have plumbed the depths of Revelation not when you can produce an intricate chart of future events, but when you find yourself responding to God as his servant in greater measures of obedience and passion knowing that he is not only alive, but sovereign, and returning – and you are ready for his return.