

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER

Rev 21:1-4, 22-27; 22:1-5

1/5/20

Introduction:

- A. I remember telling one of my pastor friends some years ago that I was going to be preaching about heaven. “Oh,” he said, “do you have a lot of older folks in your church?” One of my favorite and most important pastoral duties is to make you *all* homesick. I imagine a pastor being like an elderly uncle of refugee children. He often gathers them to tell them stories of the homeland and King they have never seen. He tells them that the day they go home they will be a beautiful bride coming down the aisle of the skies to meet her Bridegroom. The uncle’s challenge—*mine*, actually—is that he cannot let the King’s children forget their home.
- B. Turn to **Rev. 21**. I want to remind you of your home one more time before I leave so we’ll go to the last two chapters of the Bible. For now, believers who die are with Christ in paradise, in what theologians call the intermediate state, waiting for the return of Christ. Then when Christ has brought the end of all things—the defeat of death, the final judgment, and the consignment of Satan to hell, this is what will happen. Here is the home we wait for. Rev 21:1-5...

I. OUR HOME IS A BRIDAL CITY IN A NEW WORLD (21:1-5)

- A. To begin with, our new home will be a new creation—“a new heaven and a new earth.” *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,”* but sin poisoned and polluted not only hearts but all creation. **Rom 8** says, *“For the creation was subjected to frustration,”* but *“the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”* That’s the *“new heaven and new earth.”*

Even though our homeland will be utterly new—the way the Garden of Eden was new—we most certainly won't feel out of place. A character in C. S. Lewis's Narnia story, *The Last Battle*, put it this way, *"I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now... Come further up, come further in!"* But that is just the landscape and the sky. It gets better!

- B. **V.2**, *"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."* This is a kind of reversed rapture. First we rise to meet the Lord in the air from this world, and later we descend to this re-created new world. **Vv.9-11** expand the picture:

One of the seven angels ... said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."

So are we looking at architecture or people? The Holy City is Christ's bride. This chapter describes the city's dimensions and foundations, her gates and streets, yet the real point is not the city's bejeweled architecture; not *what this city is* but *who!* When we read of the Holy City descending to the new heaven and earth we ought to play *"Here Comes the Bride!"* This is *us!*

- C. Don't miss this: the New Jerusalem will be a holy city populated by brothers and sisters washed clean of every offending sin, every off-putting weakness, every defensive memory. No one you won't like; in fact, no one you won't

absolutely *love*! **Imagine living where every face is the face of a friend, and every friend bears a striking resemblance to Jesus.**

- D. But there is something better than the new creation, better than this beautiful, bright Bride: v.3, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” That is God’s great and ancient covenant promise to his people. I counted at least 17 times in the Bible where that statement is made, beginning with God’s covenant with Abraham in Gen. 17. It is a promise held out again and again to God’s people when they were wandering far from the Father, when their hearts were breaking, when hope seemed gone. And it is a **promise that very nearly aches with yearning of God himself.** No one has ever looked forward to this day more than God himself, whose love has spared no expense to make it true. Finally, in our forever home, God will be among us. No faith will be required for we shall see him!
- E. Finally, that wonderful assurance: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” **In heaven, suffering won’t have a leg to stand on.** Illus.: An elderly Christian woman lay dying. Her beloved husband sat by her bedside, tenderly holding her hand. They both knew that the end was near and that they soon would be parted. (Some of you have been there. You remember that moment.) As their eyes met, a tear ran down the old woman’s wrinkled cheek. Gently her husband wiped it away. Then, with a quiver in his voice, he said, *“Thank God, Mary, that’s the last!”* [Illy, “The End of Tears”]

Now jump to vv.22-27...

II. OUR HOME WILL DRAW THE SPLENDOR OF THE NATIONS TO GOD'S LIGHT (21:22-27)

- A. The presence of God and the Lamb—the Lord Jesus Christ—means the city doesn't need a place where God's people to go to pray or worship. Once, the temple was the focal point of the old Holy City, but no more. There's no need for a temple when God is right there among us. It will be like the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve could walk with God himself in the cool of the day.
- B. What's more, there will be no need of lamps or sunlight because God is light. That isn't just a metaphor. He *is* light. Where God is there are never shadows. His light is life-giving, an everlasting remedy for endless seasonal affective disorder of human hearts—the SAD of this world. This also means that there simply is no darkness in our homeland. Yet God's light won't weary us the way any other light does. We will never yearn for the dark relief of 'lights out.' The Lord's light will always energize and refresh us. His light is life-giving.
- C. Then there is the intriguing image of the nations bringing their splendor into the Holy City. This pictures the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that all peoples on earth will be blessed through him—through his descendant, Jesus Christ. I usually think of how alike we will be in heaven—all forgiven and wearing white robes, all singing praises to the Lamb—but **heaven won't be homogenous!** Somehow, through the creative genius of God, every nation of the world, and every nation in history, purged of their sin, will be somehow represented in heaven by the redeemed saints from among them, and will bring their

God-given cultural treasures and distinctions into the Holy City. **Randy Alcorn** writes, “Consider what it will be like to see the Masai of Kenya, the Dinka of Sudan, the Hmong, Athabaskans, Tibetans, Aucans, Icelanders, Macedonians, Moldovans, Moroccans, and Peruvians. Hundreds of nations, thousands of people groups will gather to worship Christ. And many national and cultural distinctives, untouched by sin, will continue to the glory of God.” [p.366]
That is our home!

Now listen to **22:1-2...**

III. OUR HOME IS A GARDEN OF LIFE (22:1-2)

- A. The older I get the more I enjoy gardens. Now when we begin planning a vacation somewhere the first thing we look for is whether there are gardens rather than amusement parks. So I love this part of our future home.

The Holy City has little in common with the cities we know. It is much more of a garden. The new heaven and new earth is a kind of *re-creation* of the first heaven and earth. **Gen. 2:10** says “A river watering the garden flowed from Eden.” And in that garden God had planted a tree of life, the fruit of which would have enabled Adam and Eve to “live forever,” according to **Gen 3:22**. That’s why they were banished from the garden. In God’s new creation, there will again be a river—“*the river of the water of life,*” but this one flows from God’s throne, watering trees of life. Jesus said that he offered “*living water,*” so that those who drink will never thirst again. In fact, **Rev 22:22** offers this invitation: “*Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.*” Somehow in our forever home, the River won’t flow with mere H²O but with **liquefied Life**, springing from the headwaters of the throne of God.

- B. Not only does life run in the river, life also grows on trees.
V.2, “*On each side of the river stood the tree of life,*

bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Ezek 47:12 paints a similar picture: “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.” Honestly, I can’t quite wrap my head around this! Fruit suggests sweet, fresh taste and nourishment. Imagine strolling along the River of Life, plucking this celestial fruit: *“Hmmm! Tastes like peace! Why, it’s brimming with freshness and flavor!”*

- C. The trees not only bear fruit, but their leaves are medicinal, *“for the healing of the nations.”* It’s as if these leaves, pulled from the trees of life, ooze a kind of **holy aloe**, healing the deep wounds of this world for all who make their home in that garden. Trees that endlessly delight, satisfy, and heal all who live there.

Let me show you one more thing: **22:3-5...**

IV. OUR HOME IS THE PERFECT PLACE TO WORK (22:3-5)

- A. Think about that statement, “No longer will there be any curse.” After Adam and Eve sinned, God told Adam, *“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

Contrast that with the trees along the river of life, with their endless fruit and healing leaves. But not only was he ground cursed, so was work itself. In our new home, the curse on work—the thorns and sweat that make all our work here so hard—will be gone. Work will be restored. *“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, **and his servants will serve him.**”*

- B. We’ve overdone the idea of heaven as a place of rest because that tends to conjure a *really* long, and frankly, boring retirement. While awaiting surgery years ago, the Christian writer **Joe Bayly** imagined arriving in heaven.

I’ll say, ‘Hello, Lord. I’m tired.’

And he’ll say, ‘Rest, because I have work for you to do.’

‘Rest?’

‘Yes, remember that I myself rested on the seventh day of creation.’

‘And work?’

‘Of course. Did you think heaven would be an eternal Sunday afternoon nap? My people serve me in heaven. I have work for you to do.’

‘Keeping all the gold polished?’

‘Ruling angels. Managing the universe for me.

Someday, being responsible for whole cities.’”

Bayly got that from our text: “...*his servants will serve him.*” The Greek word John chose here for ‘serve’ is a word used only for the *service of God*, like what a priest does. In heaven, all our work will be holy service, but the range of that work is beyond our imagination. Imagine doing science in the new heaven and earth! Imagine creating music or other art! Imagine making things when there are no thorns to make your work a pain. Imagine exploring, developing, inventing; imagine serving when

being a servant is your nature. Imagine how wonderful it will be to work together when everyone is like Jesus! All the infinitely varied ways “his servants will serve him” will be like a layered worship anthem in many parts, a Hallelujah Chorus of activity. Imagine a vast yet intimate fellowship, never in shadows, in which God himself illumines all we do, where all the variety and glories of every culture is brought into our life with Him and where the likes us do not only *live* forever but reign—*reign*—forever and ever. [from P.G., p.153]

Illus.: The evangelist **Leighton Ford** wrote, “When our son Sandy died at the age of 21, a missionary who had overseen his work as a summer missionary in France wrote us a letter, and he said, ‘I was stunned--21. So many gifts to use. I thought, What a waste.’ Then he said, ‘Leighton, I realize we are so earthbound. Sandy’s highest service has only begun.’”

Illus.: **Jack Hayford**, a beloved pastor from Los Angeles, told this story: *“It was a deeply sobering day when I came to Carl’s room in the hospital knowing there were only a matter of hours to live. And as we sat beside the bedside, I said, “Carl, how are you feeling?” A man of deep faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and a very experienced and highly respected lighting director at CBS, he looked at me, his eyes misted slightly, he said, “Pastor Jack, you know when you’re in my business, it’s the combination of lights, the skill at blending things together in order to create special effects, that’s what this job is about.” He said, “This morning I woke up and in the quiet of my heart, Jesus spoke to me and he said, ‘Carl, how would you like to direct a sunset?’”* [CD, Heaven,]

Heaven—what a perfect place to work!

Conclusion

The Bible teaches these wonderful things about heaven so that we don't get so attached to this alien place where we live and so that we persevere in holiness *now* for the joy set before us.

Thoughts of heaven are not just for the elderly or the ill. **These things are given us so we might all be homesick.**

Illus.: J.R.R. Tolkien's book, *The Return of the King*, tells the tale of a final, decisive battle between the forces of good and evil. Afterwards, two of the heroes, Sam Gamgee and Gandalf the Wizard, unexpectedly find each other alive. Sam says,

"Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

"A great Shadow has departed," said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. But he himself burst into tears. Then, as a sweet rain will pass down a wind of spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed.

"How do I feel?" he cried. "Well, I don't know how to say it. I feel, I feel" – he waved his arms in the air – "I feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves; and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!" [#2413, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p.230]

And some day we shall feel it too, when we finally get home!