

Revelation Bible Study #50

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 21:9-27

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” **10** And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, **11** having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. **12** It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— **13** on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. **14** And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. **16** The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. **17** He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. **18** The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. **19** The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, **20** the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. **21** And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, **25** and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Introduction

This point in Revelation presents reality for believers after the Eschaton has taken place. It is a picture of what life *looks like* for Christians after the Final Judgment has been enacted. Since it is a physical resurrection, there must be a place for Christians to dwell. Thus St. John describes the New Jerusalem, not as an ideal place but as a real one; it is the city which Abraham searched for, “whose designer and builder is God.”¹ While the climax of history is presented here in some detail, not all is given. To the contrary, the passage raises more questions than it answers, but assures us that the outcome is *good*.

Though the New Jerusalem is a reality for believers in the future, like other core eschatological matters it also applies to us in the *present*. The “already but not yet” dynamic continues on regarding the circumstances of eternity. Much of the things said about the city are couched in symbolic language which refers back to the present circumstances of salvation. While this has led those of the Roman Catholic and preterist schools to presume that it is just a symbol for the Church or a heavenly abode, it is truly meant to encourage the reader regarding both the future *and* the present.

1 Hebrews 11:10

Vs.9-11

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

The hermeneutic of the passage is introduced by the presence of the plague-bearing angel. In the fifteenth chapter, St. John saw the angels bearing the seven bowls as a *sign*,² suggesting deeply symbolic language. That said, the ninth verse affirms that the angels with the bowls were not mirages or sock-puppets; the sign of the bowls was a real occurrence in Heaven, the consequences of which are truly felt here on earth despite their symbolic descriptions. We are thus to understand the New Jerusalem in the same light, as St. John's vision will use veiled language to point to a concrete future reality.

The angel takes St. John to a *mountain* to see the New Jerusalem descend from Heaven. This connects the book of Revelation to Ezekiel's vision of a new Temple.³ More importantly, the imagery recalls that of *dominion*. It invites the reader to compare the Apostle's experience and vision to the temptation in the wilderness, wherein the devil took Jesus to a high mountain, showed Him the kingdoms of the world, and offered to give them to Him in exchange for apostasy.⁴ Christ refused the offer, and now we see why. The Apostle is taken to this mountain, and it is high enough to see and describe a city which is one thousand and four hundred miles across: being able to see this place, and then seeing the City descend, tells us that what shall arrive is greater than any kingdom on earth has ever been. Christ refused the devil's offer not only on moral terms, but because the Kingdom He is to receive is of infinitely more value.

The city itself possesses God's Glory, which is consistent with God's pronouncement in the preceding verses “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.”⁵ Just as the face of Moses shone after prolonged contact with our Lord,⁶ so too will the City possess a radiant quality to it which matches both the Jasper-like appearance of God⁷ and the clear sapphire architecture of Heaven.⁸ With the special Divine Presence and its descent from the sky, what is portrayed is quite literally Heaven on Earth.

Vs.12-14

12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Ezekiel's vision of a Temple included a Jerusalem with twelve gates on its walls. Each gate was named after one of the patriarchs of Israel.⁹ St. John reiterates this detail, but adds that the twelve *foundations* are named after the twelve Apostles. This suggests to us that, while the Old Testament saints and their lives are by no means forgotten, the Apostles have an equal (if not greater) prominence to their twelve forebears. Since evil and death have been abolished, the function of the wall and its gates (which are always open anyway) is not defensive, but rather celebratory; the wall and its

2 Revelation 15:1

3 Ezekiel 40-48

4 Matthew 4:8-10

5 Revelation 21:3

6 Exodus 34:29

7 Revelation 4:3

8 Exodus 24:10

9 Ezekiel 48:30-34

foundations adorn the outside of the City with great honor given to the saints who did the greatest part in working for God's Kingdom before Judgment Day.

Vs.15-21

15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. **16** The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. **17** He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. **18** The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. **19** The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, **20** the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. **21** And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

The measurements negate the question of whether the Apostle is having the same vision as Ezekiel. St. John's vision of the city is simply too large for the Jerusalem that Ezekiel saw, which had a circumference of 18,000 cubits (about five miles). This portrays the ideal Old Covenant spiritual reality¹⁰ being dwarfed by the New Covenant. This is compounded by the foundations (which represent the Apostles) having the gemstones of the tribes of Israel – previously a feature of the ephod worn by the high priest,¹¹ now shown in the Apostolic foundations of the Church. While the harlot, mystery babylon (at the time the old Jerusalem), was also adorned with jewels and gold,¹² the City is adorned as a *Bride*, making all of the majesty sanctified instead of sinfully opulent.

Furthermore, the description of the City not only dwarfs the Old Covenant, it also overshadows the original desires of collective mankind just after the Flood. The height of the New Jerusalem is equal to its width and length. At 1400 miles, this means that its height is above earth's atmosphere. Man attempted at Babel to build a structure that would have reached the heavens, but God confused their languages to prevent its completion.¹³ With the New Jerusalem, God accomplishes what mankind could not, and it is those who trusted in Him who enjoy residence in the sky-reaching City, not those who trusted in the world.

Yet while all of these measurements and details are *teaching* us something, they are not intended to be entirely figurative. St. John equates an “angel's cubit” to that of a man, informing his readers that at least the normal species of angels is roughly the same size as a human being. If the New Jerusalem was *merely* a symbol for the Church, the Apostle would have no need to specify its dimensions by these measurements. To the contrary the City itself is very real even in a physical sense, only its construction positively *preaches* to believers as they walk its hallowed halls.

Vs.22-26

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, **25** and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Since the reader is assumed to be familiar with Ezekiel's prophecy, the pronouncement that there will be no Temple is *explosive* in its effect. In the first century, especially before the first Jewish

¹⁰ Whether Ezekiel's Temple is a heavenly reality or merely a portrayal of an ideal is unclear.

¹¹ Exodus 28:15-21

¹² Revelation 17:4

¹³ Genesis 11:1-9

war, the Second Temple was the center of Jewish life. For this massive structure to be absent from Eternity – and not only that, but the Heavenly Temple furnishings as well – is to posit a change which even Christians today cannot understand. It would be like saying there shall be no Church buildings, no denominations, and no more Baptisms... which appears to be a true saying. Just as the Temple is unneeded in terms of a spiritual intermediary, so too shall there be no need of modern, Church era intermediary edifices like church buildings. Christ Himself shall be present at all times, being our Light by which we walk.

There are less clear matters here though. How exactly are there nations living outside of the City bringing their glory into it? If the City is saturated by God's Glory, how can anything else be brought into it? Various exegetes have connected these verses to Isaiah 60, in which a similar promise of nations bringing offers and glory to God's people is made,¹⁴ but that presupposes that a certain class of people is *subservient* to the residents, and who generally do not live in New Jerusalem. If the Apostle is saying that Isaiah's oracle is fulfilled here entirely, this would also mean that, per Isaiah 60:22 there is also a mode of reproduction for believers. One might reply that it is symbolic language, but the insistence on parallel angelic and human measurements in the fifteenth verse demonstrates that it is *more* than mere parabolic writing.

The best option for the exegete regarding these mysteries is to take them as St. John's way of saying that the believer's life will be *active*. We shall not be in a state of eternal contemplation, but rather we shall be moving, exploring, having fraternal relationships with other believers (at least), eating, drinking, doing things that were formerly considered work but are now effortless, and enjoying a deeper communion with God. This is on account of the “already but not yet” dynamic at play here. Christians do things now: they shall do things and live actively then as well. Christians may worship our Lord and reach out to Him regardless of any Temple edifice, just as at the Resurrection He and Christ shall be our Temple. Just as Christians have a firmer foundation in the writings of the Apostles, so too shall they have a firmer (literal) foundation with the City, decorated with the names of the Twelve. Thus St. John posits an active eternity wherein all the good that this world had to offer is still present, but *perfected*, including the messages which the Church receives from the Word.

¹⁴ Isaiah 60:1-22