

Revelation Bible Study #51

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

Revelation 22:1-5

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. **3** No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, St. John presented us with the details he saw pertaining to the New Jerusalem. While its descent onto the New Earth presents an eternal home for all believers, the Apostle is showing us more than a mere location wherein God and man live. The city's dimensions and features show our Lord accomplishing that which mankind could not during the Tower of Babel incident. New Jerusalem reaches into the heavens, while Babel's edifice was left unfinished; New Jerusalem has men from all nations dwelling therein forever, while mankind was *scattered* at Babel; all believers dwelling in the heavenly City shall understand God and one another, while at Babel confusion of tongues was introduced. In a word, God shall *undo* the curse with this new City, and introduce the blessed estate that man had sought all along.

As we reach the final chapter of Revelation, we note that God does not stop there. He is portrayed after the Eschaton to be *busy* with projects that further rectify the dour history of man. The works of the devil and world and flesh are destroyed in Judgment Day, the earth is made new as it is cleansed in fire, and man is brought to new heights (literally) in the New Jerusalem. For the last Divine action portrayed in Revelation, we are treated to a view of the New Eden *within* the City, by which men understand that the Fall is undone entirely. Thus the reader is invited to see an undoing of all misfortune and evil having been completed in that moment.

Vs.1-2

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

St. John describes a reconstructed Eden in the middle of the New Jerusalem. Originally the Garden had four rivers flowing out from it,¹ yet here only the “river of the water of life” is present. This water of life is called so because it flows from the throne of the Author of Life, making it thus a manifestation of the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son – and without Whom life would be an impossibility. As the Holy Spirit has been portrayed at various times as a dove, seven torches, eyes, etc., here He is fulfilling His own previous epithet as the “rivers of living water” from St. John's Gospel.² As the Father and Son are shown sitting on the same throne, and the Holy Spirit

1 Genesis 2:10-14

2 John 7:37-39

proceeds out from them, all three Persons of the Trinity are present for redeemed mankind to interact with.

The tree of life is present as well, humanity having formerly been barred from enjoying its benefits.³ Though only one tree is mentioned, it is on both sides of the river, suggesting that the tree has bent through the weight of its twelve fruits and lurches across the water. Though the number twelve is typically related to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles, here it is a means of suggesting superabundance. After all, it is the leaves, not the fruit, which are used for healing the nations. As mankind will have eternal life by virtue of being in God's gracious Presence at all times, and as the believers are already promised to eat of the tree,⁴ the use of the leaves is a means of establishing that the races of mankind shall have their reconstitution in the most beneficial ways *collectively* (though the Apostle does not explain this in detail).

The “Already but Not Yet” dynamic is quite apparent here. The Cross on which Jesus was crucified is well noted by the ancient theologians to be a kind of tree of life, because it is by His crucifixion upon it that we have our eternal life in the first place. Believers receive Christ in the Eucharist as the fruit of that tree, and benefit further in life by partaking. In Baptism, by water and the Word we are brought to eternal life as well, especially in being united to Christ. Insofar as the Christian receives the Sacraments and trusts in Jesus for their salvation, these are ever-present realities for each believer. But as none of us have yet actually eaten of a fruit which bestows an eternal existence and we have not drank from the river of life physically, this remains in the realm of “not yet” as well. Nevertheless, as the tree of life in New Jerusalem continues to be utilized among the nations, and as the river of life continues to flow, eternal life is shown to be a process into which men grow (much like sanctification for believers in this earth); it is not a “one and done” sort of reality, but a continued and enduring period of growth for all believers. After the Resurrection man remains mutable but only insofar as he may improve, growing in holiness and good character.

Vs.3-4

3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads

The absence of accursed things means that there shall be no more curse present upon the earth. All of the damned have been placed in the fires of hell, by which their presence is no longer in consideration for the Church. The saints who have had to endure the accursed presence of the damned during their earthly travails will find that for eternity they enjoy a constant presence of our Lord instead. Where there was persecution, now there is life. Where there was loneliness, now there is communion. While they shall certainly be able to see God's actual Face, here it is also connected to the Old Testament connotation of *blessing*. Whenever God sets His Face *against* someone, they are harmed.⁵ Whenever God *hides* His Face from a people, they are dismayed.⁶ But for the saints, seeing God's face will be a sign of blessing along the lines of the Aaronic Benediction, wherein the blessed is told that God makes His face *shine* on them for peace and good rather than terror and judgment.⁷ Our foreheads having His Name as a mark solidifies and guarantees this blessing, as we shall completely and fully belong to Him.

Here also it is revealed that frequent worship will be a feature of the New Earth. Yet here we must confess that there is a great deal of mystery. Though much of Revelation forms the shape and

³ Genesis 3:22-24

⁴ Revelation 2:7

⁵ Leviticus 17:10, 20:6, Jeremiah 21:10

⁶ Deuteronomy 31:16-18, Psalm 27:9

⁷ Numbers 6:22-27

means by which the most prominent liturgies in Church history were formed, this does not mean that our worship will take the same shape as they do now. After all, with God's Presence, we shall not have a need for the Scriptures as a direct impartation of wisdom, conversion, and knowledge. For that matter, the sacerdotal aspect of worship will be rendered unnecessary as well; why would people who have gone into this glory have any need for receiving absolution? Truly, there shall be praises offered by the saints, but in the kind of intimate communion each believer will have with God, one hesitates to think that separate "thanksgiving" services are necessary. And yet, we shall worship Him in the New Jerusalem.

Vs.5

5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

The center of all history is the Cross. History began when God said "let there be light," ending the indefinite period in which darkness was "over the face of the deep."⁸ Replacing this period of darkness is a new eternity in which darkness is nowhere to be found. The text itself contrasts the blessed ending with the dark beginning, suggesting that we are not to understand this verse symbolically. In the New Jerusalem at the very least, the saturation of all things with the special presence of our Lord means that light will be a constant in the eternal lives of the saints.

Though this is the last historical act of God that we see in Scripture, it does not mean that nothing shall happen afterwards. The saints are said here to *reign* with Christ, and if they are to reign then they are to reign over something. While it is yet to be shown what that looks like in practical terms, the Christian in eternity shall be a busy individual, helping to administer the final state of reality which will endure forever.