

Sermon on Revelation 21:22-22:5
29 December 2024, CCRC
Rev. Tom Bomhof
A City of Light

Regent College Professor Darrell Johnson, before he read from these last two chapters in the Bible, said, None of us is going to comprehend what we are about to read. The images are straightforward, but we won't understand what they mean. He quoted Paul Spillsbury: "The Apostle John piles image upon image and picture upon picture so that we are almost overwhelmed, trying to imagine the details of the vision."
One scholar said, "The text is so full, at some point the imagination goes on strike"

So don't be literal as you hear these words. Let the words wash over you and give you the comfort and assurance John intended them to give to the persecuted church he wrote to in the First Century. As you listen to the passage, think about the theme of this sermon series, noticing how the light shines in the new heaven and the new earth.

[read passage]

Dear Friends of God,
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We are at the end of our series on how the light gets in. We've seen how the light brings life to the world by God our Creator. We've seen how the light gives us courage and strength by God our Protector. We've seen how the light leads his people home by God our Guide. And we've seen how this light changes things around for us by God our Disrupter.

And now at the end of the Bible, in the two very last chapters, we see that the end is filled with light. God is our everlasting light and our eternal home.
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The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

there will be no night there

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.
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We are travelling to a place of light. Our journeys in the light of Christ will take us to a place that is filled with the light of God's presence, the light of peace, and the light that gives us purpose.
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The new heaven and the new earth are lit by the presence of God. God has found a way for his glory to dwell directly with his people. In Exodus, God allowed Moses to get a peek at his back

side, after he had passed by. But that was the most anyone got to see of God's face. God had warned Moses and the people of Israel,

"But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Exodus 33:20

God's glory was fierce. His holiness was so powerful that nothing unholy could come before him and survive.

But here in the new heaven and the new earth, we are given this amazing picture:

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They will see his face

No more Temple to mediate the glory of his holiness among an unholy people. No protecting people from his seeing him for fear of them dying as a result. No more giving people like Moses just a little a peek at his back. God's face is his presence. Seeing God's face is seeing God directly, knowing God directly, just as he knows us.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12

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For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 1 Corinthians 13:12

Or as the Living Bible translates:

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In the same way, we can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at his reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see him in his completeness, face-to-face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (Living Bible)

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No more hazy and blurred understanding of God. Clarity, complete understanding, full revelation characterizes what we will experience in the end. We will know God directly just as he knows us. The boundary between heaven and earth that once demarked the place of God and the place of people will have been permanently removed.

The light of God's presence is a deep comfort to us. Our time on this earth is marked by the mystery of God. We see God in so many different ways: in creation, in his word, in the church, in the sacraments. Yet we don't see him, and won't ever be able to on this earth. But in the end, our longings will be fulfilled. It is a mystery revealed. We will see God face to face.

That makes any fear we have now seem pale in comparison. I know someone who died on the operating table for several minutes and was resuscitated. He told me of the power of the light that he saw and the comforting face of Jesus he felt as he drew closer and closer to the light. But he came back, and he is glad. He told me his is also fearless now. He has seen what death

leads to and he will be perpetually ready for it. Death leads to the very face of God, his glorious, comforting, powerful presence.

Can you imagine the power of that comfort? Especially for those first century Christians who were persecuted and martyred at the hands of the brutal Romans. Be strong, be fearless. In the end you will be in glorious light and see the very face of God. And still for us today we have the hope of glory that sees us get through pain and sorrow and suffering. In the end there is light. There is God.

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Which leads us to the second feature of the light we want to look at. The light is a peaceful light. Our passage highlights this when it says,

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The Lamb is its lamp.

Don't try to figure out what that looks like. But sense the way the Lamb is our light. The lamb who was slain, the lamb whose sacrifice gives peace with God, whose blood takes away our sins and who is the only source of true forgiveness is now the light of the new heaven and the new earth. That creates a place of outstanding peace:

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Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Only the redeemed, the ones who live in the power of Christ and his sacrifice, only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will be there. As Michael Gorman points out, there will be an absence of all that is anti-God. The image of light combined with the flowing water from the throne means

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The removal of all that prevents human flourishing in community before God and the presence of all that permits and promotes that flourishing

- Michael Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly

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God's shalom will be there, his full, rich peace and flourishing. No more sin, no more chaos, no more war, no more greed, no more cultural hubris, no more fear. The curse will be removed and there will be peace.

This peace is pictured by open city gates:

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On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.

I don't know why people speak of a single pearly gate when they think of heaven. You know the one, where St. Peter is sitting in judgement of all who want to enter. There are actually twelve gates, each made of a single pearl. And they are not shut, waiting for St. Peter to open them. They are always open. The gates are not there to keep people out, but to welcome people in.

The gates are always open because there is no night there. Cities are often places of dark alleyways and dark corners of danger. In ancient times cities had gates to keep away criminal elements or hostile powers. In the morning, when the sun came up, the gates could be opened again and people could flow in and out of the city.

But because there is so much light from within this city no one would ever sneak up and attack. No one would creep in alleyways. In fact, all the powers of the earth are drawn to the light of this city and the kings bring their splendor to it. All hostile elements are gone. No one is out to get anyone. So the gates can be open all the time. The peace there allows the city to be a bustling place. No static standing around simply gazing on the beauty of the golden streets and the face of God. People are coming and going, worshiping, thriving, living with each other in harmony. It is a place of shalom.

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Which leads us to the third feature of this light. Not only is this a light of presence and a light of peace. It is also a light of purpose.

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The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

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I once had a member of one of my churches whose dad had just died tell me that he was comforted that his dad was now an angel and was watching out for him. Sort of like a guardian angel. It was a way of him to find some meaning in his father's sudden and untimely death. But I wonder how he got such an unbiblical idea of what happens to us when we die. We don't actually turn into angels. We remain human beings with resurrection bodies and will continue to do human things, purposeful things, with God at the centre.

In the words of the Nicene Creed,

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We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come.

Our physicality will continue on.

Why is it that when we think of heaven we think of it only as a place of angels and us becoming some kind of spiritual being? Why do we think we are going to wind up in heaven at all? We are earthly beings. We are created to live on earth, to tend the earth, to discover its beauty, to develop its riches and potential. The same is true in the end. There will be

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a new heaven *and a new earth*.

The boundaries between the two will be taken down. Yet there will still be kings, nations, physical bodies. We will still be earth-bound beings doing earth-bound things. It will be

profoundly different, yet profoundly the same as what we experience here on earth in our physical bodies.

In the end we will be in a city. We started in a garden, but we don't wind up in a garden. We wind up in a city. It's a beautiful city, with garden-like qualities, but it is a place of buildings, roads, and structures. It is a place of commerce, arts, science, learning, and leisure. It is a place of governments, nations, tribes and peoples. It is a place of purpose.

In the end, whereas nations were once divided by conflict and competition, they will live in cooperation, centred on the light of God. The new earth will be organized into nations and societies characterized by peace, cooperation, sharing, encouragement and thriving. Power dynamics will shift. Instead of earthly rulers asserting their dominance, invading other lands, influencing votes, brutalizing their enemies, they will acknowledge God and submit to his higher authority. They will trade with each other with justice and fairness. They will put on vibrant festivals showing off the wonders of each culture. There will be cultural exchanges, art exhibitions that show off the beauty and talents of the different nations. It will be true joy. We will be fully human and fully alive as God intended.

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Knowing this is the end influences us already now. As Reformed Christians, we often go back to the garden of Eden to find our guideposts. Creational norms rightly guide us as we look for the ways we are to be in this world. We see that things are not the way they are supposed to be in this world and we go back to the way God created us to try get back to the way God made things.

Yet here in the last book of the Bible we see the end is not a return to the garden. It is a garden-city, a new place with new ways of being. Now, along with asking "what was it supposed to be?" we also ask, "What is it going to be?" What we see in the end will guide us as well. We let the hope of the eternal presence of God, the peace of the Lamb and the purpose on the new earth shine its light on our path.

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Christ has come to reveal this light to us, so we follow him. We listen to his word, we live out his teachings and his values. We also live with the hope this light gives us. We are fearless because we know how it will end and that God wins. The world is not going to end in a smoking ruin. It will be renewed and God's light will shine. In ways we can hardly imagine we will have a joy and purpose and life with God that will go on forever. The child born at Christmas will take us there.

AMEN