

A Reflection on Revelation Chapter 21: The (So-Called) Eternal State

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those that love Him – but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

The Bible draws to a close with a brief glimpse into what awaits us in the resurrection. What is there is glorious beyond description, although John is only able to sketch its basic outlines. What the Spirit has revealed is deliberately scanty so that we look forward with intense anticipation to experiencing it. Whatever your own thoughts are regarding what eternity will be like are irrelevant; here in this chapter God reveals it to us. And it's not what anyone expects. We should understand what awaits because it directly influences how we're to live in this here-and-now. Before we look at this chapter, let's briefly review the Bible's overall narrative to see how we got to this point.

The Bible opens with God creating a physical cosmos, a place made up of physical matter that exists in time and space. But it's a world that's only “very good.” It's not perfect. Why? Because in this world there's “night.” There's darkness. There's *evil*. When the opening sentences state that God created light, that indicates that the story of the Bible is a moral one. It has to do with the defeat and banishment of evil so that only good remains. In this physical world we live in, there's both dark (night) and light (day). Are we creatures that God made going to live in the light? Or in the dark?

The Creation intent, as revealed in the Bible's opening pages, is that God would dwell physically with His human creatures who were made to reflect His glory. There was a mountain at Eden, and God lived atop it, and around the mount was a garden in which that first couple dwelt. And God would walk in the Garden with His humans, in blessed fellowship. God didn't need that relationship, its purpose was to bless His beloved humans. But something else: those first human creatures had to be morally tested: would they honor a good and wise God by believing Him and obeying Him, or not? Would they take the side of good, or the side of evil? Tragically, Satan, the very embodiment of evil, deceptively influenced that fateful decision. So that first couple failed the test. And all human creatures since then, all descendents of that first pair, participate in that failure. Choosing evil, we cannot reflect God's glory (except in certain general ways, such as using our intelligence to accomplish things). Because humans had been given dominion over nature, all nature had to suffer God's curse due to the entrance of sin. The Bible's narrative will have to end with a resolution to this horrible issue so that God is glorified.

The rest of the Bible – right up to the last few pages – reveals the story of how God has been on mission to recover and restore His lost humanity. The Genesis narratives have an interesting recurring theme, “not the first but the second (or a subsequent).” Jacob pondered this spiritual reality his entire life, and at its end he understood, putting his right hand of blessing on Joseph's second-born (48:17-19). God's choice for blessing is not the first, but a second! So the descendents of that first couple, after the Flood, all grouped into families and then nations. We were created to be social creatures, that is, to be engaged with one another as brothers, as if God were our Father. But due to rebellion, God placed certain wicked supernatural beings, *elohim* or “gods,” over those initial nations to rule them, leaving them in a permanent state of alienation. Those evil, rebellious Gentile nations were violent and filled with greed, lies and hate, constantly at war, likened in Scripture to the turbulent, restless sea. God then created a new nation that hadn't previously existed to take them as His own, Israel. He would rule over and physically dwell within the Nation of Israel as if that people were His son. They needed instruction how to live righteously in His presence (Torah). And they were given a responsibility, to take back to those rebellious, alienated Gentile nations the knowledge of their own Creator God. It was a reprise of those early Genesis creation narratives, having the same dichotomous choice: obey, reflecting good, and so experience life, or disobey, reflecting evil, and so experience death. But just as Adam failed thru disobedience, so did Israel. Someone had to come who would lead Israel, indeed all humanity, back to fellowship with God.

In time, that Someone came. The Son, the 2nd Person of the Godhead became incarnate and in perfect obedience took upon Himself all sin and guilt, suffering the punishment of death that justice demanded. He rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and awaits His Return to earth to rule over a restored Israel and the nations. And He will do that, He will return to vanquish His enemies, bind and imprison Satan so that he can't practice wickedness, and bring peace and righteousness to a restored Creation that will endure for a thousand years. The Nation of Israel then will be restored, be spiritual, and will fulfill all that God had intended for them. And they will be greatly blessed. The nations too will

experience blessing under the rule of the righteous King. But there's more. Even after that long period of peace and righteousness, evil will surge once again. And God will finally deal with it in justice and great power, casting that wicked serpent and his agents and followers into a place of torment forever away from His holy presence. And that will bring this first physical creation to an end. Heaven and earth will vanish, bringing us to Revelation Chapter 21.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . ” (21:1). Just as the first existed in time and space, so does the second! The “eternal state” isn't existence in some ethereal place above the clouds, it's another real, physical, material world, like the first but with significant differences. This is not the Millennium! This is a new, physical creation following the Millennium where God dwells with His people for an eternity.

“And there was no longer any sea” (v. 1b). “Sea” refers to the restless, turbulent, violent gentile nations, so in this new existence, there won't be sin and rebellion and chaos and wickedness. God's great purposes have been fulfilled. In a more literal sense, this new creation evidently won't have oceans, it will be just a land mass.

“the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (v.2). This would be the city that Abraham was looking for (Hebrews 11:10), whose architect and maker is God. (This future city is mentioned again in Hebrews 12 and 13.) This “city” is not a metaphor for the Church; it's a real, literal city, an awesomely, transcendently beautiful and immense city in the shape of a cube, not like any city we have known on earth. This God-made city is in contrast to Babylon, a wicked, man-made and self-glorifying city that Christ destroyed in the previous chapter, which represented all earthly, human-made cities filled with corruption, lies and evil-doers. This New Jerusalem was founded by God as a gift for His beloved people, and its beauty is superlative because God intends to lavish love on His people. This city fulfills the promise Jesus made in John 14:2, “I go to prepare a place for you.” David founded Jerusalem for His subjects; Jesus is preparing the New Jerusalem for us—all of us who are *in Him*.

“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (v.3). The purpose of creation is now fulfilled. The fellowship that was intended in the first creation is now realized. Humanity at long last can be blessed by being forever in the presence of the infinite God, without the hindrance of sin. We will participate in some way in the love, joy and *shalom* of the Godhead. What God in love offers to His human creatures is . . . Himself!

“There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (v. 4). No more death! That's because death was a punishment for disobedience, but in this new creation, only people who are transformed and holy will be present, so death and curses are over with. All things in this new physical creation are morally perfect, reflecting God's moral perfections. A new beginning without evil is now possible, only goodness and blessing will exist, forever.

“He who was seated on the throne . . . ” (v.5). Christ the King rules forever! All authority was given to the risen and ascended Christ, but it wasn't until He returned to earth for the Millennial Kingdom that that authority was revealed and exercised. But the Kingdom didn't end with the Millennium but continues on into the new creation, because Christ was (repeatedly) promised an everlasting Kingdom.

“It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (v.6a). All the first creation was by and for the Son. It began with the promise of the Son to come to earth and deal with sin and evil, and that first creation ended with the now incarnate Son ruling over an existence in which sin and evil were dealt with. Jesus is the One who caused all history to occur and He brings it to its intended end. He is eternal and sovereign. He makes a new creation now possible.

“To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life” (v.6b). Whoever in this present existence wants it, in love God makes available eternal life. But notice: Jesus says, “I will give,” because eternal life is in Christ, in His Person, and nowhere else. See John 14:6.

“He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (v.7). The “overcoming” here surely refers back to chapters 2 and 3 in which those in the churches who “overcome” enjoy salvation, a salvation to be experienced in this new creation. But what exactly is it that's “overcome”? Any term in Scripture that's ambiguous is

deliberately ambiguous. The word means to be victorious in a struggle. So Jesus overcame the world, death, and all evil, and if we're *in Christ*, we share in His victory. "Overcoming" is only possible by being in personal relationship with Christ. Yet we're expected to be overcomers too. Active obedience to Him, His teachings and commands makes us like Christ, thus we're also "overcomers." In the power of the Spirit, we are able to overcome evil, sin, selfishness, worldliness, idolatry and fleshly lusts. Notice how our Revelation text contrasts overcomers with evildoers (vice lists are given in both Ch's 21 and 22). The unsaved, that is, unbelievers, express the evil within them by their works, and in the same way believers express their salvation by being overcomers, that is by their righteous deeds, obedience to Christ, imitating Christ, enduring persecution, sacrificing themselves as needed for Christ. The unsaved are condemned by their works of evil; we in contrast glorify God by our deeds, by how we live. Paul writes that we are to live righteously because, if not, evil overcomes us (Romans 12:21).

The term "inherit" is used in this verse. To inherit means to obtain something that was the work of another person. We obtain this eternal fellowship with God thanks to the atoning work of Jesus in the first (old) creation. The God/son relationship this verse mentions (adoption) is a special, unique, intimate, permanent fellowship that God in love makes possible for those who are *in Christ*. In verse 9, the saved are referred to as **"the bride, the wife of the Lamb."** Again, salvation is being in an intimate relationship with Christ.

"On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel" (v.12). Ethnic Israel is here in this new creation. God didn't take the nation of Israel for Himself and then abandon it when their leaders rejected Christ. No, God took Israel as His own nation forever. **"The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb"** (v.14). The Church is here represented by their founders, the Apostles, who had the responsibility of authoring the New Testament revelation. The distinction between Israel and the Church is maintained throughout Scripture; the notion that the Church replaced Israel as the people of God is totally false. By the way, houses have foundations, but here the entire city rests on a foundation, indicating its stability and permanence.

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (v.22). A temple was a specific dwelling place for God, but in this new creation, the people itself are in God's dwelling place. We are in what was previously the Holy of Holies, living there with God Himself! We are "partakers of the divine nature." This verse highlights the blessing of salvation: intimate fellowship that will exist between a holy God and His transformed and glorified creatures. No one is worthy of any of this; it's all by grace.

"The glory of God gives it [the city] light" (v.23). There won't be a sun or moon or stars in the new creation. The transcendent glory of a holy God will fill it. This gigantic, unique city will glow with the splendor of God. It will be so brilliant the entire new creation will be illuminated by it. It will be glorious!!! In the tabernacle, the shekinah glory was hidden from the people; not here though. Everyone will be aware continuously of God's transcendent splendor. Light expresses God's ineffable holiness, so to live in "light" means we're living out God's goodness, His holy will.

"The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it" (v.24). In this reprise of the visit to King Solomon of the Queen of Sheba, rulers who represent the people of all the nations will come to the city to worship. In this new creation, there still will be nations. People will still be grouped into territories by their ethnicities. The goal of the first creation was the salvation of those Gentile nations, not the obliteration of them. Jesus is termed the "King of Kings" because He will rule over all the rulers of those specific nations.

"There will be no night there" (v.25). No night! Night means evil. But now all evil has been done away with. In this new creation, there will be only goodness and holiness, life and light. What has made this possible is Jesus being an overcomer, being victorious over Satan, indeed over all wickedness in the cosmos, and by His manifesting transcendent love. The gates to the city are open all the time because . . . hey, there are no enemies here.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb . . . on each side of the river stood the tree of life" (22:1-2). Life! Life was promised to those who trustingly obeyed God in the Garden and all through Scripture, and to all who believe in Christ. Now in this new creation is the fulfillment of that promise, everlasting life. Notice that the tree **"yields its fruit every month."** In other words, the tree

bears fruit not seasonally but perpetually. Notice that there's time in this new creation. Eternity isn't timelessness, rather, it's endless.

"The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him" (v.3b). In this new creation, the people of God will serve Him. In the first creation, God's human creatures were to serve Him, and that responsibility continues in this new creation. There's no greater privilege anyone can have than to serve the living Creator God.

"They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads" (v.4). The most precious part of eternity is, we'll be in continual, intimate fellowship with Jesus. We'll have full access to God all the time, to enjoy Him and be blessed. The Gospel is God's invitation to this fellowship. His name on us means He owns us; it's not merely for identification.

"And they will reign for ever and ever" (v.5c). To reign is a privilege. We were originally created to rule (Genesis 1:26), but that was lost due to disobedience. During the Millennium and again here that dominion is restored. The privilege of ruling will be granted to all who are in this new creation, and it will go on endlessly. Further details of this "reign" are withheld. What God has in store for those who love Him is too glorious and too wonderful for mortals to contemplate, so it's not being revealed.

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What does this vision of eternal life mean to us today? Certainly, these three things: 1. As Abraham did, we're expected to live today in light of our future. Abraham left his native city to dwell the rest of his life in tents in the land promised to him, looking forward to the promised future city, all the while enjoying knowing God. Similarly, our real home is the future city, not what's here in this life. We're pilgrims and sojourners in this current life, here to know and serve God. We need a biblical sense of "home," and this world is not it. This vision also means that if in the future we're going to be holy and actually be in the presence of God, we need *now* to be holy and live in His presence. That's why the Gospel offers us one of the most precious of all privileges, access to God. We need to continually keep in mind this truth: we go thru this present life willingly sacrificing whatever is necessary to be obedient to God in the confident expectation of being rewarded in the future by participation in the new eternal creation. This vision was given to us so that we remain faithful to Christ regardless what circumstances bring, regardless what loss we may suffer because of our Christian identity, regardless what compromises Satan or his world tempts us with.

2. This vision vividly and dramatically shows that God's great cosmic purposes in this creation will certainly be fulfilled. At the end of history, God defeats and disposes of all evil, so that only His goodness remains. God is totally glorious in showing love and in blessing His people. So we're on the winning side. We can be totally certain that whatever sacrifice we make, whatever loss we suffer in this life is more than worth it. Whatever evils we encounter in life or whatever Satan throws at us, in the end, a good God will not only prevail but will vindicate us. So, for example, we can forgive those who offend us, and we can love our enemies. And we should not only have no fear of death but view death as our portal into this blessed future. *We need to keep this vision in mind always.* I hope that we don't believe the Gospel only in order to escape hell but, rather, so that we can pursue the most fulfilling life possible knowing and serving the living, infinite God who is lovely beyond imagination, and who in love offers Himself to us to enjoy forever.

3. God's entire plan of salvation from Genesis One to the very end is intensely moral. It has to do with the defeat of evil so that only good, God's goodness, exists forever. As people of the light, we're here purposely to join God in His work, and we do that by practicing righteousness and by sharing the Gospel with others. Look at Revelation 12:11 and also 19:7-8. And look at almost the very last words in Revelation, "The Spirit and the bride say 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!'" (22:17). It's the responsibility of all who have responded to the Gospel in faith to invite others also to respond. God wants His enormous city filled with people; He is not willing that any should perish.

Dear reader: Our current mortal life is preliminary and probative. We have a fixed amount of time to fulfill what God expects of us. Let's not be smug about our relationship to our Savior, nor complacent about our obedience to God's will (or lack of it). When this life ends, perhaps unexpectedly, no further change is possible. Let's therefore, especially in view of this magnificent vision at the end of Revelation, commit now to obeying Christ, to putting on robes of righteousness and making whatever sacrifices are necessary to exalt the risen and living Christ, whom (I assume) we love.