

Heaven-part 3

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Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:9-17; 22-27

Sermon Text: Revelation 22:1-7

Introduction

Pastor Jack Hayford tells this story of his visit with a dying church member.

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. 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, and 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?'"ⁱ

What is the thing that gives you the most joy? What are the things that you would love to spend all your time doing? Our favorite things often include our relationships and friendships with loved ones, some aspects of our work, our relationship with God individually and corporately, and experiences in the beautiful world that God has created. Jesus says in Matthew 7:11, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" Here, Jesus is talking about Earthly things, but God does not change, so we can fully expect God to give us good things that fulfill our desires and needs for all eternity in heaven.

Scripture Reading

In our Scripture reading, the angel who had poured the final bowl of God's wrath upon unbelieving humanity showed John the wonders that await those who love God and His Son, Jesus. The angel says to John, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb." Here, the angel is referring to the New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ in verse 10, where the angel carries John away to a high mountain, where he sees the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. The New Testament also refers to the church as the bride of Christ. We see in Ephesians 5:25-27 that Christ gave His life for the church so that she might be cleansed and purified and that He might present the church to Himself holy and unblemished. In Revelation 19:7-10, before the millennium and after the Rapture of the church, we read of the marriage supper of the lamb to His bride, who are the faithful saints of all ages.

So how do we reconcile the clear indication of Scripture that the New Jerusalem and the Church and all the saints are both the bride of Christ? Often, a place and a people are called by the same name. Israel is a place, but it is also a people. The New Jerusalem is a place, but the citizens of the New Jerusalem are also a people who are in eternal union with Christ. We will live in the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city. You and I will live there forever. Jesus says in John 14:1-3:

- 1** "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.
- 2** "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.
- 3** "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

As I said last week, many Bible scholars believe that the place Jesus left Earth to prepare for His followers is the New Jerusalem. I agree with that interpretation. When we consider the description of the New Jerusalem, we will see that only God could make something so splendid.

So, let me summarize what our Scripture reading tells us about the New Jerusalem. It appears to be a cube 1500 miles in length by 1500 miles in width and 1500 miles in height according to human measurements. It could also be a pyramid with the same dimensions, but the simplest reading is that it is a cube. To put that in perspective, the distance from Hartford to Bismarck, North Dakota, is only 1425 miles. So, how many saints could fit in the New Jerusalem? Let's say that each saint received 10,000 square feet of living space with 100-foot ceilings, and only a quarter of the New Jerusalem is available for saint condos. If that were the case, a city the size of the New Jerusalem could house 100,000 billion, which is 100 trillion saints. That is a lot of saints. But my simplistic calculation is based on a human understanding of life and real estate, and as Paul informs us in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" — the things God has prepared for those who love him." Dear friends, something awaits us that is far beyond our understanding that is far grander than we can conceive.

John describes the New Jerusalem as having the glory of God, brilliant as crystal-clear jasper, which was a precious stone of his time. Diamonds weren't available in the first century. Otherwise, he might have described it as a brilliant diamond. The city is guarded by twelve angels, one at each gate. Three gates were on each side of the city, named after one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The wall around the city had twelve, obviously very large, foundation stones, each of which appeared to John to be precious stones of varying colors, bearing the names of the twelve apostles of Jesus. The thickness of the wall is an amazing 72 yards, three-quarters of a football field. The twelve gates in the wall appear to John to be fashioned from a single pearl. This is where the expression "pearly gates" comes from. As for the streets of the city, they are of pure transparent gold.

Toward the end of our Scripture reading, we begin to get a sense of what goes on in the New Jerusalem. In verse 22, we learn there is no temple because God the Father and God the Son are its temple. Temples are for communion with God; in the New Jerusalem, God will be ever-present for communion and union with His people. Have you noticed that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is conspicuously absent in this passage? Where is He? You and I, and every true believer, from the moment we believe in Jesus, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is in the saints and connects us to God the Father and God the Son. The Trinity is the perfect community, and that community in the New Jerusalem will be extended to include all the saints in union with their God by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the plan of God determined in eternity past will be fulfilled.

Over and over again, we find in the OT and NT the theme that in human history, God is making a people for Himself to be in communion with Him. As I mentioned in Revelation 21:7, God says, "I will be His God, and He will be my Son." What God has accomplished in human history is made plain by Paul in Titus 2:13-14, "...Christ Jesus, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." God wasn't caught off guard by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and since the fall, He has been at work redeeming and purifying a people for Himself who love Him and His Son, and who love His moral code and see it as right and good, who desire to do good works that glorify Him and affirm His worth.

In the New Jerusalem, there is no need for a sun or moon because God and the Lamb illumine it; thus, there will be no night. The gates will never be closed because there will be no threats. Nothing unholy or unclean will come into the New Jerusalem, for only true believers whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be allowed into it. But it is not a sealed city. There are gates, and so it seems likely that the saints of all ages might exit and re-enter the city at will to explore and serve God in the New Heavens and the New Earth, which is the kingdom of God. What wonders might we encounter there? What excitement and joy might be

available to us there? What glory might we bring to God through our service in the New Jerusalem and beyond? All is not revealed, but enough is revealed for us to know that that is where we want our eternal home to be.

Exposition of Sermon Text

Next, we come to our Sermon text, the first seven verses of the final chapter of the Bible. John is taken in the spirit and sees the river of the water of life coming down from the throne of God and the lamb. John the Baptist is quoted in John 1:29, referring to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus was the blood sacrifice that satisfied God's wrath for the sins of the world. So, the Lamb is Jesus, and He sits with His Father upon the throne in John's vision. The crystal clear river runs down from the throne of God, the source of all that is pure and good, in the middle of the street, which appears to be the main road in the New Jerusalem.

On either side of the river is the Tree of Life, which first appeared in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. Scholars debate whether there is a single tree or many. Perhaps it straddles the river of the water of life, or perhaps there are multiple trees, and they are located on either side of the river. The tree of life was last seen in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:9, where, along with the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it was planted in the center of the Garden of Eden. Verse 2 of our sermon text tells us that the tree of life bears twelve kinds of fruit, yielding fruit every month, and its leaves were for the healing of the nations. After Adam and Eve sinned, God barred them in Genesis 3:22 from eating from the Tree of Life, for had they eaten from it, they would have gained eternal life in their fallen, sinful state. God could not allow that to happen because God's purpose in creation, as we learn in Titus 2:14, was to make a people for Himself zealous for good deeds, living in communion with Him. God had to let Adam and Eve, and all other humans, die so that the faithful could be reborn into the family of God, declared righteous by their faith in Jesus, and thus able to be in His presence.

In the New Jerusalem, the Tree of Life seems to have therapeutic properties that sustain the saints and contribute to their physical well-being. Did you notice what tree is missing from the New Jerusalem that appeared in the Garden of Eden? I want you to notice the conspicuous absence of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not found in the New Jerusalem because there is no longer any need for it. In the Garden of Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil served as a test of obedience to God for humanity. God wanted Adam and Eve to freely choose to obey or disobey because, as I noted before, God did not want His heaven populated by robots who had been forced to obey Him. So, He gave them a choice. But in the New Jerusalem, only faithful believers who love God and His Son, those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, will be there. So, there is no longer a need for obedience tests. Furthermore, Satan and his henchmen, all fallen angels, all unbelievers, and those who do evil will be eternally separated from the faithful in the lake of fire. Thus, God will have banished all temptation from the new heavens and earth.

In verses 3-4, with the advent of the new earth, there will no longer be any curse, for all things have been made holy and new. The throne of God and Jesus will be in the New Jerusalem, and God's bond-servants, all of us who believe, will serve God, and we will see Him face to face; this will only be possible because, in Christ, we will have been made fully righteous. Furthermore, our identity as a child of God will be obvious, for His name will be on our foreheads, identifying each of us as a possession of God. In contrast, all those who received the mark of the beast, who is the antichrist, on their forehead or hand described in Revelation 13:16-17 will join him in the lake of fire.

John continues in verse 5, revealing that there will no longer be any night. No lamps or light of the sun will be needed because God will illuminate all things, and God and Jesus will reign in the New Jerusalem, in our presence for all eternity.

Let's close with some answers to the obvious questions we might have and some applications for our lives. First, who will be in heaven in the New Jerusalem, the Holy City of God? In Revelation 21:7, where God is speaking, we learn that all the blessings described in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation are for those who overcome. And furthermore, to the one that overcomes, God says, "I will be His God, and He will be my Son." Jesus says at the beginning of the Book of Revelation, Chapter 2, verse 7, "...To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God." Who are these overcomers? The Apostle John is specific about what it means to overcome. He writes in 1 John 5:4, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." Believers, the faithful of all ages, are overcomers, and it will be granted to them to eat from the tree of life, sustaining them for eternity. In that beautiful verse from Revelation 7:9, John sees in his vision, "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes..." Finally, the races and the nations will be at peace.

What about children who die before the age of accountability or are mentally incapacitated and cannot make a decision about Christ? David's child from his adulterous affair with Bathsheba died shortly after childbirth. David testifies in 2 Samuel 12:23 that he would be reunited with the child when he died, in other words, David affirmed that he would meet the child in heaven. On that basis, and the mercy and compassion of God, most Bible scholars would say that children and the mentally incapacitated will go to heaven. So, likely, you can look forward to meeting these individuals as well.

What about believers who contract Alzheimer's and lose their mental capacity? Our soul is eternal, and I believe that, on that basis, it recalls all our experiences and all that we have learned. The brain is just the receptor of the soul, and it will be renewed along with the rest of our bodies when we receive our resurrection body. So, we will have perfect memory in heaven, and I look forward to the head of flowing red hair I once possessed!

Believers will be joined by the faithful angels who did not join Satan in his rebellion against God. The angels currently live in heaven but seem to have access to the entire universe and are sent by God on specific assignments. The angel Gabriel visited the prophet Daniel in Daniel 9 and Mary at the annunciation that she would be the mother of the Son of God described in Luke 1. Furthermore, at the return of Christ, angels play the critical role of removing all the unbelievers who do evil and confining them to hell, as described in Matthew 13:41-42. In Revelation 5:11, the Apostle John sees millions of angels around the throne of God.

So, what will our existence in heaven be like? In heaven, there will be no unbelievers, evildoers, death, or disease, for these will be confined to hell. As we learn in Luke 16:26, there is a great gulf between heaven and hell that no one can cross. The faithful of all ages will bask in unbroken fellowship with God and Jesus; as I said, the Holy Spirit facilitates this. As Jesus says in the beatitudes (Matt 5:8), "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Finally, we will see our Creator face to face in His resplendent beauty and enjoy Him forever. So, too, we will experience a glorious reunion with our Christian loved ones and friends. We will not be married in heaven, as Jesus says in Matthew 22:29-30, but our deep relationships will remain intact. And our decaying, broken-down bodies will have been replaced with physical resurrection bodies that never die, similar to Jesus' resurrection body. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:42, we will be raised imperishable.

Furthermore, all of our needs will be satisfied in heaven as we read in Revelation 7:16-17, "They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." We are certainly

unworthy, but Paul writes in Colossians 3:4, “When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

Next, let’s consider the activities of believers in heaven. You can discard the notion that we will sit on clouds and play harps. Heaven is a physical place, and we will have physical bodies that will, I expect, have new and amazing abilities. Jesus appeared in a closed room in His resurrected body and ascended into heaven. I am certain you will not need a car or spaceship to get around in heaven. As we see in Revelation 7:9-10, we will “worship and praise before the throne of God and Christ.”ⁱⁱ Our worship will flow from our love and gratitude for our Great God and Savior. It will not be forced or coerced. It will be genuine and better than our best moments of Earthly worship because our God will be before us, and we will have a far better understanding of who He is and all that He has done. I tried to give a perspective of the grandeur and glory of our God at the beginning, but certainly, that does not scratch the surface of describing the greatness of our God. He is far greater and far more worthy than we can imagine.

In verses 3-5 of our sermon text, we learn that we will serve God and Christ and, furthermore, that we will reign with them forever and ever; this is certainly unexpected and undeserved. What amazing things will God have us do for Him? In the parable of the Mina of Luke 19, Jesus tells us that a nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom and later returned. Before he left, he gave His slaves varying amounts of money to do business to earn a profit for Him at his return. To one, he gave ten minas, which was about three years of salary for the average worker back then. In Luke 19:15–17, Jesus describes the outcome. Upon his return. The nobleman “...ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done. ¹⁶ “The first appeared, saying, ‘Master, your mina has made ten minas more.’ ¹⁷ “And he said to him, ‘Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.’” To the slave who did not earn a profit for the nobleman, the nobleman was greatly displeased with him and judged him as worthless. It seems that if we are faithful in this life, Jesus will entrust us with more in heaven. Furthermore, our God knows what brings joy to our hearts, and I believe He will assign us work that will excite us, cause us to grow, and bring us joy.

I believe our limited understanding of the possibilities of what we will encounter in heaven is related to our limited understanding of the universe we currently inhabit. The diameter of the Earth is 8000 miles, and the sun's diameter is more than a thousand times as great. The sun is so large that you could fit 1.3 million Earths in it. Yet our sun is only average in size. If you replaced our sun with the largest known star, known as UY Scuti, all of the planets in the inner solar system, as well as Jupiter, would be inside that star, which has a diameter of almost 1,500 million miles. But our star, the sun, is only one of the stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, which contains about at least 100 billion stars, perhaps as many as 400 billion. A spaceship traveling at the speed of light could circle the Earth 7.5 times in a single second, traveling at 186,000 miles per second. Yet it would take that same spacecraft traveling at the speed of light about 106 years to cross the Milky Way Galaxy. Our Milky Way galaxy is but one of many galaxies in the universe. It is now estimated that there are 2 trillion galaxies in the universe, which in total are estimated to contain a trillion trillion stars. Moreover, the diameter of the observable universe is so vast that our rocket traveling at light speed would take 93 billion years to cross it. Do you get the picture? Our God created all that, and suffice it to say, our view of God is completely inadequate and far too limited. Our God is worthy of our worship and all that we are! If these amazing facts describe our decaying, fallen universe, how much greater and more spectacular will the New Heavens and New Earth be? We are in for a wild and interesting ride as we transition from this earthly plane to God’s eternal heaven.

Take heart, my friends. You have been wise in placing your faith in Christ in this life.
Glorious things await us. Amen.

ⁱ Heaven, Gaither Gospel Series CD (track 14)

ⁱⁱ Rhodes, The Undiscovered Country, 91.