

31

REVELATION 21: 1 – 8

WATCH THE DAWN OF A NEW WORLD

With Revelation 21 we come to the final and, for many, the most beautiful and exciting part of the Book of Revelation. In the visions of the apostle John we now come to the climax of the Grand Finale of our history. We will see the unfolding of the final result of God's redeeming grace in the victory of Jesus Christ.

But this Grand Finale has two sides. Jesus' victory does two things.

Let us back up a bit. The outpouring of the seventh bowl of God's wrath in Rev. 16:17 ushered in the great day of God's Last Judgment. What is happening on that day is then shown to John in the visions of Rev. 17 - 22, the whole final section of the book.

Chapters 17–20 picture God's wrath, God's punishment, and Jesus' victory over his enemies, those who are put into their proper place, the fiery lake of burning sulphur.

Chapters 21–22 picture how God renews heaven and earth, and so fulfils his commitments and promises. And because of Jesus' victory he graciously rewards those who remained faithful to him.

In 21:1–8 we see the first vision of the amazing new realities that are coming. Later on, in 21:9–22:5, we will get more elaborate descriptions of the New Jerusalem.

But the beginning of Rev. 21 is also connected with the previous passage, 20:11–15. Remember, we were wondering what was going to happen to those whose names were listed in the book of life. In the picture of the judgment of the wicked there is already a hint of the coming joy.

And here it is: through John's admiring eyes we watch the dawn of a new world.

THE ORIGIN

As we move with the apostle John through the last day, the day of Jesus' return, we see, through his admiring eyes, this great wonder of a new creation, the dawn of a new world. *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth*, he tells us. The glorified Christ shows him what is coming, so that on this old earth, we may look forward to the new.

Some think of this as something that is so entirely new, that it has no connection whatsoever with the old. And, yes, it is true, John adds that *the first earth and first heaven had passed away*. In Rev. 20:11 it says that they fled from God's presence, and that there was no place for them. They had to make room for a new beginning.

And that is understandable. It is our world where Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and Babylon the great prostitute have carried out their evil schemes, as our history unfolded. That was disastrous. And so this dark world, filled with the consequences of sin, rapes, thefts, hatred, anger, revenge, hurt and pain, it cannot and should not remain. A new world must replace the old.

However, 'new' is not the same as 'another'. The Creator does not abandon the works of his hands. In his second letter the apostle Peter explains how this universe will be subjected to a purifying fire, and that out of this a new universe will be born. Everything John sees is new, but it is the redemption of the old, not its abolition.

It is the same heaven and earth, but so totally and so comprehensively renewed, redone, rejuvenated, that it looks and feels brand-new, and at the same time familiar. A glorious transformation of the old world.

It is like an old house that is such a rundown ruin that it is beyond fixing. Minor renovations will not do. It can only be demolished. But the owner loved the old house so much, that he decides to build a new one at the same location and exactly according to the architectural drawings and blueprints of the old one. And when people who used to live in the old house walk into the new one, they feel at home right away.

In the Old Testament we read about this promised transformation in language that points at continuity in the midst of changes so drastic, that it will be totally different from the world as we know it today (Isaiah 65:17–25). And now John sees how God fulfills Isaiah's words.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul pictures a groaning creation, stuck in futility and inevitable decay. But it carries the hope of freedom and renewal, as it is waiting for God's powerful and glorious re-creation (Romans 8:18–25).

As the result of sin there is much pain, suffering, damage, and brokenness in this world. We do not mind leaving those things behind. But sometimes people wonder about losing beautiful things they love in this life. And indeed, Jesus tells us to be prepared to give up everything for the sake of our loyalty to him.

But in the process we will also find that nothing that has genuine value in God's eyes will be lost. After all, God himself is the source of all that is beautiful and joyful, and you will get to live with him, in his presence. We do not know the details of what we will find back in the new world. But we do know that his presence means perfect joy. So, no, you will have no regrets and no longings that cannot be satisfied.

John also noticed that *there was no longer any sea*. There are some different opinions on this. But there is no need to think that you will not be able to sit on the beach and enjoy a beautiful ocean view. In the Bible, and in particular in Revelation, the sea is often a symbol of chaos, danger, and evil. It

stands for a breeding place of antichristian political and cultural powers (as in Rev.13).

In other words, the removal of the sea is symbolic for the permanent removal of every resistance against God's authority. All the powers that challenge God's rule and order will be exterminated, to make for peace and stability in the new world.

But then there is something else that catches John's attention. With this totally renewed universe as backdrop, John sees *the Holy City, the New Jerusalem*.

A city is a permanent place of residence where many people live and work together. And so this new world will have human inhabitants, who form a society where people experience communion and enjoy fellowship.

When you read this, you might wonder: why don't we hear again about the New Heaven and the New Earth after v.1? As we read on we find out that in the rest of Rev. 21 and 22 all the attention is only for the New Jerusalem. Are there not more cities, towns, or villages on the new earth?

Now you can be quite sure that the re-created world is bigger and has more to offer than just one city. But the vision zeros in on what is at the centre of this new world. Think again of the symbolism. This city symbolizes the marvellous reality that the Holy God and the new mankind will live together in a happy communion that will never end.

Let us have a closer look. We are all familiar with the name "Jerusalem". The 'old' city of Jerusalem we know as the place where God dwelled with his people Israel, first in the tabernacle and later on in the temple. Here the sacrifices of the priests gave all Israel access to God, to pray and receive forgiveness.

Later on, all this was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Everyone who believes in him and in his one sacrifice on the cross has direct access to communion with God. And the Bible tells us that Christ sent the Holy Spirit so that the church all over the world may be this place where God dwells and allows us to come close to him.

That is why the church is called 'Jerusalem', a symbolic name that tells us that the Holy God himself is present. That is a wonderful way of looking at the church, yes, also your own church.

Today already you may look beyond the failures of people in the church, the things that annoy you, bother you and disappoint you in the church. Today already you may see in the faithful church the gathering-project of the glorified Christ.

But what you see of the church today is not the final product. It has all the weaknesses and shortcomings that come with every project in this broken and sinful world. The Jerusalem that John is seeing is called 'new' and 'holy'. It represents the final perfection of the church's communion with God and the joy in his presence. And its 'holiness' shows in its complete, unrestrained dedication to God.

And it comes *down out of heaven, from God*. Indeed, the origin of the New Jerusalem, the complete universal church, as the centre of the new earth, is God himself. It is not the result of our hard work. No, it is the product of God's craftsmanship.

The church of Jesus Christ is often dismissed in this world, as some human structure to fulfil our religious needs, something that has no future in our secular society. But the church is born from above. It is the result of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. And this is going on today already.

Think of it! This is so encouraging, so comforting. Christian believers become strangers in an antichristian culture and society. This is not where they feel at home. But they do not become homeless. In the church they find a new home, as a foretaste of the New Jerusalem.

And on the last day of the history of this world it will be seen by everyone that God's salvation project is complete, successful, and permanent in the New Jerusalem as the perfect church. Let this future help you to resist the pressures of our idolatrous society.

Then the vision shifts from the city to *the bride adorned for her husband*. This is also a picture of the church. Think of Rev. 19:7-9 about "the wedding of the Lamb". And Rev. 21:9 speaks again about *the bride, the wife of the Lamb*. This image stresses the intimacy, the love, and the pleasure we may

experience in the communion with God. And again, this may start today already, but will be perfect in the world to come.

But John not only sees things. He also hears things. This is not the first time, and, as usual in these visions, what he hears explains what he sees.

He hears *a loud voice*. That is not the first time either. It is obviously important that people everywhere will hear this news from the throne in heaven. This is God's throne (see Rev. 20:11), but apparently God is not the speaker.

God's voice we hear in v.5. So, the one who speaks here could be one of the four living creatures that stand around God's throne (Rev. 4:6), or perhaps the angel mentioned in Rev. 1:1 as John's contact person with Christ.

But the point is the message in v.3. And that is incredible! In the old order of things, determined by sin, the Holy God dwelt in heaven, while the earth was our living space. But this will change.

O yes, God dwelt with Israel in temple and tabernacle. And today he dwells with his people in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. But this is different. This is an enormous step forward.

Why is this holy city coming down from heaven? Because we see the dawn of a new world in which God is coming to live with his people. Jesus' victory means that all separation between God and us will be removed.

Listen to what John is hearing. *Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.*

Notice that the expression "with them" is used three times. It stresses the significance of what is happening. This is what it is all about. This is what the New Jerusalem stands for: God will live with people. He will live among us as close as never before. And we will be worshipping him and enjoying such strong, deep, and intimate communion with him as we have never experienced before.

When the festivities begin of the eternal marriage-feast of the Lamb Jesus Christ with his glorious bride, his perfect and complete church, gathered

from all nations, his Holy City will be filled with joy. And everything that disturbs our joy today will be gone.

Watch the dawn of a new world, a world from which every stain of sin, every scar of wrong, every trace of death will have been removed, never to come back! God's new world and city will be free from the corruption and the groaning that are so typical of our world today.

Today death is the enemy who fills our eyes with tears as we stand at the graveside of our loved ones. We try what we can to escape him. But on that day Death, and together with him, all the misery that comes in his wake, all grief, sadness and mourning will be gone.

Human lives get stuck in loneliness, anxiety, depression, mental illnesses, and addictions. Our lives are often damaged and broken. Our hearts are filled with pain. But one day that will all be over. The helpless and desperate cries, "O God, where are you?" will never be heard again. For he will be with us, so close that with his own hand he will wipe away every tear in deep and tender love. A stunning picture!

THE ARCHITECT

Then John hears a second voice. It is the voice of the One *who was seated on the throne*. Now the Holy and Almighty God himself is announced as the Speaker. This has happened very few times before in Revelation, in 1:8 and 16:17, and now again. It tells us that we come close to the glorious climax and the end of this book. God's plans are coming to completion. Can you imagine hearing God himself speak, directly?

So, let us listen carefully. The One on the throne said: *I am making all things new*. As it turns out, the throne of judgment we saw in Rev. 20:11–15, is also the throne of grace. In his grace our God personally guarantees the very newness and certainty of what is coming. That is his sovereign power as the Creator and Re-Creator. As in Genesis 1, God speaks and it is. God's speaking brought about all things in the beginning and it will also bring about all things new at the end.

I am making all things new. Indeed, ‘all things’. Nothing will remain the same. Nothing will remain untouched. As it said in v.4, *the former things have passed away.*

He alone does that. We do not. As they have always done, people dream about ways to make this world a safe and happy place for everyone. When we keep the environment clean, provide better education, promote social justice, and a more equitable distribution of health and wealth in the world, we will get there. Eventually, we will be able to usher in a new and better era. Utopia is coming.

But it will not happen. Every human effort to bring about a better world is bound to fail. God alone can make all things new through his Holy Spirit. And this begins in the human heart. No one else can bring in a new and better world-order.

The Holy God, the Maker of all things, reveals himself as the Architect and Builder of the new world and the New Jerusalem that is coming. He is working on it already. He will complete it and present the final result when Jesus returns. Today you and I can hardly imagine that the effects of sin can ever be removed. And yet, it is going to happen, it really is! I cannot wait to see what it looks like. How about you?

To strengthen this trust and anticipation in us, John is also told to *write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.* Who is saying this? The ESV suggests that it is God, who just continues to speak. But then it is not clear, and a bit redundant, why we need in v.5 and 6 three times the words “And he said” so close together referring to the same speaker.

It makes more sense, and gives a more lively and dynamic picture of what is happening, when speakers alternate. God first says, “I make all things new” and then someone else, perhaps John’s guidance-angel (mentioned in Rev. 1:1) instructs John right away to “Write this down”. And then God continues, saying, “It is done!”

In Rev. 1:11 & 19 the apostle John was given the general instruction to write down everything he was about to see and hear. But a few times he is instructed to write down particular sayings, because they are so important. That is in Rev. 14:13, 19:9 and here. It is like reading a document that has

some sentences highlighted, or in bold print, so that you will always remember what it says.

In other words, we are told to never forget that what God says here is trustworthy and true. Of course, everything that God says is trustworthy and true. But we are just people. We need this reminder in a world where such announcements are often ridiculed. The promise that God will make all things new is often dismissed as the nonsense that keeps religious fanatics busy. And since we do not see the result yet, we can easily be sucked into this kind of thinking.

So let's read those highlighted words over and over again. God will really do this. We live in a broken world. But he will make all things new. We do not just dream it up. We trust God's Word that cannot be broken.

Then, in v.6 God continues and adds, *it is done*. This is the same statement that we heard in Rev. 16:17, after the seventh bowl of God's wrath was poured out. Both statements are each other's counterparts. In 16:17 it marks the completion of God's punishment, and in 21:6 it marks the realization of God's salvation.

And remember what we have seen earlier, the description of these things in Rev. 17–22 is not a chronological narrative. It is one event on the Day of Jesus' return. With the words "It is done," both Punishment and Salvation come together as effects of the seventh bowl. As the new world appears, God declares, "What I promised is now completed. It is done. Mission accomplished according to plan".

I am the Alpha and the Omega. With the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet God presents himself as *the Beginning and the End*. He controls everything. Throughout the history of our world he has led all events to this point (see also Rev. 1:8).

He is not just present at the beginning and at the end. No, he is personally the beginning of everything, and in him personally is the end of everything. Everything began with God, everything went out from him as the source. And everything will lead to him as the final goal, and result in his glory.

This makes you wonder what life in this new world is going to be like. "Well," says God, *to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without*

payment. This “water of life” is mentioned also in Rev. 22:1 and 17, and Jesus himself talks about “living water” in John 4 and John 7:37. It is an image of “eternal life”.

So, when God talks about those who are thirsty, he refers to all who are looking forward in faith to eternal life, the time to enjoy life to the fullest, for ever and ever, never-ending bliss.

If that desire determines your life here and now, God will give it to you! At the end of your journey to the New Promised Land, God provides exactly what the parched pilgrims need, living water. And it comes from a “spring”. There is by God’s grace in Jesus Christ an endless, inexhaustible supply of water that gives life for ever.

The Architect of the New Jerusalem is also the Provider for those who live in the Holy City. And it is for free. Your eternal joy will not cost you anything, because Jesus paid for it. In the New Jerusalem God fulfils abundantly the words of Isaiah 55:1–2 *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.* [NIV]

In the New Jerusalem God himself guarantees your life as the free gift of his love.

THE ACCESS

As God continues to speak he answers one more question: for who is all this, this promised eternal life in the presence of the Holy God and of the glorified Christ? Who will have access to this Holy City? Who will qualify to inhabit the coming new world?

The one who conquers will have this heritage. You might remember this expression “he who conquers”. You will find it at the end of the letters that were written to the seven churches that were the first recipients of the Book of Revelation (see Rev. 2 and 3). Each of these letters ended with the urgent call to remain faithful and keep fighting the good fight of faith, to resist the power of Satan, to persevere in the ongoing battle with the evil powers.

Here God repeats this urgent message for everyone, for you and me. Ask yourself, do I fight in this world the good fight to remain faithful and to resist the evil powers of sin in my life? Or do I take it easy when it comes to this?

As we watch the dawn of a new world, the battle rages on in this old world and it rages on in our own lives. But listen carefully to what God is telling you. Do not get discouraged. Do not give up. Those who remain faithful and loyal to the end will have free access to his new world, to the New Jerusalem.

They will inherit what God has in store for them. The wording reminds of what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:4, 5 about *an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

When this heritage is given to you, the Holy God will say to you, "I will be your God, and you will be my son or daughter". Do you recognize the Old Testament covenant language of Genesis 17:4? In this strong, personal, and intimate father-child relationship God's love bridges the centuries and fulfils his promise to Abraham as never before. *You shall be the father of a multitude of nations.* God will give himself to you who trust in him. And you will see with awe the full reality of his glory.

God reinforces this promise of eternal bliss, by also pointing at the flipside. Those in the church who flirt with sin, or who live in sin, those who are open to the poisonous propaganda that a life without God is actually pretty attractive, and sounds like fun – if that's you, he addresses you with the same urgent message to remain faithful. *The cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, the murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars.*

With this list God does not address the pagan outsiders. Those were mentioned already in Rev. 20:15. No, no, he talks about folks in the church, who claim to be loyal to Jesus Christ, but who do not show the commitment to follow him, Christian believers who abandon their loyalty to God.

God warns you, if you think that a compromise with the wickedness of the antichristian culture is okay; if you fail to resist the temptations of lifestyle choices that ignore God's holy will; if you go for antichristian ideas or worldviews; if you make money and power your idols to trust in.

With v.8 God wants to shake us up and wake us up. Because if that is you, you are not “one who conquers” (7), and the consequences will be dramatic; you will be shut out of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. You will find the same urgent warning in Rev. 21:27 and 22:15.

God is a God of justice and in his new world no sin and evil in any form or shape will ever again disturb the security and bliss of those who live there. The holiness and peace of the New Jerusalem requires the exclusion of all evil.

And therefore those who do not repent and turn to Jesus Christ will join Satan, his evil henchmen and all his followers, and find themselves *in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur*, symbol of eternal death, of horrible torment day and night for ever and ever.

Why does a beautiful vision of the dawn of a glorious new world – why does it have to end with such a terrifying picture?

So that you and I and everyone who hears it, will not be missing when it comes.

2. Read Matthew 12:22-30 [in particular v.29], and also Luke 10:17-18, and John 12:31-32. Could there be a possible link between Rev. 20:2 and these passages? How would that help you to understand the 1000 years period?
3. How can we see that today we live in this period of a thousand years and that Satan's power is indeed restrained?
4. What does this passage mean with: the 1st resurrection; the 2nd resurrection; the 1st death and the 2nd death?

Chapter 30 – Revelation 20:11-15

1. How do passages like Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 connect with Rev. 20:11-15?
2. In Rev. 19 and 20 we read how all the enemies of Christ are systematically eliminated. What is the significance of this for us today and for the future?
3. Today the reality of 'hell' as a place of never-ending punishment is not only rejected by those who do not believe in God or in an afterlife, but it is also heavily disputed by many Christians. How can a loving God punish eternally? What about the view that in the end everyone is going to be okay?
4. Those who do not believe that hell is a place of eternal punishment have sometimes turned to the idea of *annihilation* or to *universalism*. What do these terms mean and why are they consistent or inconsistent with Biblical teaching?

Chapter 31 – Revelation 21:1-8

1. The new heaven, the new earth, the new Jerusalem are obviously the very opposite of the old heaven, the old earth and the old Jerusalem. Explain the differences between the 'old' and the 'new', and also how the 'new' versions relate to the 'old' ones.
2. What kind of connection do you see between Rev. 21:1 and Genesis 1:1?
3. The saying *I am the Alpha and the Omega* is also found in Rev. 1:8. What does this tell us about the Book of Revelation and about the visions in this book?

4. Christians are looking forward to going to heaven when they die and be with Jesus. In Matthew 5:5 Jesus says that *the meek shall inherit the earth*. What is the significance of this beatitude for the expectation Christian believers should have about the future, in light of Rev. 21?

Chapter 32 – Revelation 21:9-21

1. This passage speaks a few times about God's glory in the New Jerusalem. How do we reflect God's glory as church today?
2. How should you reflect God's glory in what you say and do, today?
3. How does this passage of Revelation show the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and what does this mean for our view of the church?
4. What are going to be the most important differences between life as we know it now, and living on the new earth, based on the description in Rev. 21?

Chapter 33 – Revelation 21:22 - 22:5

1. Several visions in the book of Revelation offer us a glimpse of 'heaven'. Some claim that 'heaven' is not real, as in a particular location, but that it is a 'state-of-mind' or a 'spiritual experience'. Can you find other passages in Scripture that talk about 'heaven'? What do we learn from those?
2. Living in God's immediate presence and our direct communion with Him will be perfect in the New Jerusalem, but it is reality today already in Jesus Christ. How does that make you feel? And how does this impact your life?
3. In 1 Corinthians 15:24 we read about Jesus' return: *Then comes the end when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power*. Does this mean that after the Last Day Jesus Christ will no longer be King? Compare this with Rev. 11:15; 19:16 and 20:4. See also Luke 1:33, as well as what the Nicene Creed says about Christ.