

33

REVELATION 21: 22 – 22: 5

LIVE THE GOOD LIFE IN THE NEW JERUSALEM

It has been a long journey through the Book of Revelation. As we are approaching the end of John's visions, it is good to recall what it is all about.

It is about the church's voyage toward the final victory of Jesus Christ over all God's enemies. A victory that opens up the glorious future of all who believe in Jesus and who have, by God's grace, persevered during the journey to God's new creation, God's new world.

Revelation was written, not only to assure us of God's final purpose, the glorious victory of Jesus Christ, but also to increase our longing for the realization and completion of this purpose. This assurance and the prospect of the great joy that is coming, comforts us in times of suffering and persecution.

Revelation directs our desires to God and to his glory. And when we focus on that, we will also recognize this world for what it is. It may look great sometimes. But it is marred by sin and evil. That is why it has no future apart from the love and grace of God Almighty and the sacrifice of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we turn again to Revelation's picture of the New Jerusalem, God's holy church. As we saw before, today God's church is his building project in

this world. And at the construction site it often does not look very impressive. But in John's visions we see the marvellous artistic impression of the church of Jesus Christ as it will appear on the last day.

So far we followed the apostle John, as he admired the architecture of the holy city, described in Rev. 21:9–21. In this next section John and his guide take us on a tour inside the city-walls, to show us the unique character of the good life in the inner city.

This will then complete the portrait of the New Jerusalem.

It will also complete the description of Christ's final victory on the last day of our history.

We reach the end of John's visions.

MANKIND REDEEMED

In the first part of John's tour of the New Jerusalem, he admired the impressive architecture of the city: the wall, the twelve gates and foundations with their splendid decorations. But the angel, his tour-guide, is not done yet. There is much more to see in the artist's impression of God's completed church. Next we are going to see through John's eyes, in a virtual tour, what life in the holy city is all about.

So, perhaps John is still standing on this high mountain, mentioned in Rev. 21:10, but you can also imagine that, still in the Spirit (v.10) he enters through one of the gates. And as he looks around, he is missing something: he does not see a temple anywhere in the city.

He sounds a bit surprised. Apparently this was something he did not expect. If anywhere, you would expect to see in a holy city, called "New Jerusalem", a beautiful temple as a symbol of God's presence. After all, in Ezekiel's Old Testament prophecies of the new city of God, the temple has a prominent place (Ezekiel 40 – 44). It is the very heart of everything.

But then John remembers the loud voice that said in v.3, that God will now dwell with man. In other words, the majesty and glory of the Holy God fills the entire city, it is everywhere, not just at one, separate, designated loca-

tion. The presence of God Almighty and the Lamb Jesus Christ turns the whole city into one, huge temple. And that, of course, defeats the purpose of having a separate temple.

What a breathtaking picture this is. Throughout the New Jerusalem, which is God's holy and perfect church, our fellowship and communion with the living God is direct and everywhere. Every barrier, every obstacle for such direct fellowship with God, because of our sins, has been removed by Jesus Christ.

In fact, this is true today already, though not yet perfect. But this is our reality: Today already we do not need a special location to meet God, a place separate from where we live and meet each other every day, a temple!

Sure, Christians get together for corporate worship at particular times and special locations, most of the time in churches. But this can be done anywhere, despite the fact that over time large and magnificent churches and cathedrals have been built. And we often call our place of worship a 'sanctuary'. But the reality is that in Jesus, the Almighty God is with us, anywhere and everywhere.

Think about this: in Jesus, your Saviour, you are constantly in God's immediate presence wherever you are and regardless of what's going on in your life. What does this do to you? Is it encouraging? Is it exciting? How does it make you feel: Joyful? Happy? Safe and secure? And how does that impact your life? This focus makes your whole life a matter of 'worship', does it not?

Well then, this communion with God will be your absolute perfect reality in the New Jerusalem, in the glorious future when God will live with his people, with you and me, as never before. Now that will be heaven on earth!

And since this presence of God will fill the New Jerusalem with the radiance of his glory, as described in v.11, there is no more need for sunlight during the day and moonlight at night. For millennia sun and moon gave light to sustain life in God's old creation. And yes, sometimes we see glimpses of God's glory in this world.

But there is still so much darkness. It can be hard for us to recognize the glory of the Holy God in our broken and suffering lives, in a world filled with hatred and violence. But when Jesus returns to usher in a new heaven

and a new earth, all this will change. Then God's children may live 24/7 in the most powerful light ever, the intense brilliance of the glory of God and of the Lamb Jesus Christ (see Isaiah 60:19–20).

John reinforces this, by identifying “the lamp of the holy city” as the One who says, *I am the light of the world*, the Lamb Jesus Christ. He came here to drive out the darkness of sin and evil (John 1:4,5,9). In him the light of God’s glorious grace shines in the church. Yes, today already, wherever the church is faithfully following her Saviour.

We admit that today this is far from perfect. But we are looking forward to see the full brightness of this light, when the New Jerusalem will be filled with it from the one end to the other, without any obstruction. Then the light of sun and moon will be redundant.

This light of God’s glory will be so powerful, says John, that it attracts even “the nations and kings of the earth”. *They will walk by the light of the holy city.*

That is an unexpected change. In Revelation ‘nations’ and ‘kings’ are usually the enemies of God’s people. They represent the hostile world-powers, the antichristian culture of Babylon, the great prostitute (see Rev. 17 & 18). They hate and persecute the followers of the Lamb Jesus Christ, the believers.

But here is the surprise. As it turns out, when the New Jerusalem appears, nations and kings have repented. They have broken the shackles that bound them to Satan and his evil helpers, the beast and the false prophet. In faith they have given themselves to Jesus Christ and now they follow him to the new Promised Land.

This is what we will see in the end, we will see the international, multicultural population of the New Jerusalem, God’s United Nations. We will see believers, converted from all nations, including political leaders and powers-that-be. They come to enter the gates of the holy city, to walk in the glorious light of God’s love and grace in Jesus.

We will see the fullness of the complete church of Christ as we cannot imagine it today. We will see the final results of centuries of world-mission.

We all know how important that is, mission, evangelism, and church-planting. But sometimes you wonder about the impact of those efforts.

When you train for mission or evangelism, they will tell you to be prepared for dead-end roads and frustrations. You will run into resistance and other obstacles. When, after many years of hard work, you count converts, you may be disappointed.

And yet, the faithful church cannot but remain faithful to the Great Commission given to her: *Go, and make disciples of all nations.*

It is true, today we will not be able to measure the final results. It is fragmented at best. Remember, today God's church-building project is still a messy and muddy construction site. John's vision is the artist's impression of what it is going to be like. And that is beautiful. Then we will see God's mission accomplished. When the pilgrims arrive in the new Promised Land no one will be missing. From all nations they will come to live the eternal good life of God's redeemed people.

Indeed, we will see mankind redeemed in all its colourful and multicultural diversity. There is no reason to believe that the gospel will wipe out the cultural distinctions and differences between the nations. The gospel will redeem those distinctions and make them useful to glorify God.

That may sound nice, but how is that going to work?

Well, says John, all this is going to serve the glory of God, and so enrich his holy city, the church. Look, and see that these kings and nations will not enter the New Jerusalem with empty hands. In v.24 it says that *the kings of the earth will bring their glory (or: splendour) into it.* And in v.26 that *they will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations.*

From all directions these kings and nations come with wedding-presents. Yes, that's right, wedding-gifts! We get a picture of a constant stream of contributions for the celebration of the marriage feast of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, with his lovely bride, the holy city, the New Jerusalem from heaven, the church.

But what kind of gifts are we talking about? Many see this 'glory' or 'splendour' as liturgical honour. They bring their worship, praise, and glorification.

tion. The apostle Paul talks about the time *when at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:10–11).

This is, of course, fantastic. But is it everything? God the Creator gave mankind so many different talents and gifts when he told them to develop our human culture to his glory. This is what has been going on. To be sure, today all human activities are tainted by sin, often driven by evil intentions, and used for the wrong purposes.

And yet, in spite of this, even today we see a rich diversity of beautiful and precious cultural achievements that serve the glory and honour of the Creator, whether they are material, artistic, technical or scientific achievements.

And all this needs to be redeemed and purified, but not necessarily destroyed. Just as the wise men from the east came with material gifts to worship the new-born King, so, in line with the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 60:3–6), kings will come from everywhere. And they will bring into the new world, what was glorifying God already in this old world.

John emphasizes the significance of this ongoing influx into the city. He assures us that the twelve gates (mentioned already in v.12,13) *will never be shut*.

In ancient cities the gates were bolted when it got dark. With criminals and enemies lurking outside the city-gates, it was too dangerous to leave them open. But on the new earth we do not have to worry about hostile attacks. There will be no more enemies. And it will never get dark. The gates will be left open, all the time (Isaiah 60:11).

Jesus came to drive out the darkness of sin, evil and misery. Believe in him. Trust in him, and you will see how this begins today already, in your own life, in his church. He died on the cross and arose from the grave to conquer God's enemies. He clears you from all guilt. He protects you against the dark powers around you.

It is still a battle. But one day the battle will be over. Hostilities will have ceased. Freely enjoy the good life with all of God's redeemed mankind, because God's New Jerusalem will be absolutely and perfectly safe.

So yes, those wide-open gates are inviting. They give abundant opportunities to enter God's holy city as a welcoming place. That feels good. But let us be careful not to make a mistake. It does not mean that everyone and everything is welcome and free to enter. John makes it abundantly clear who does, and who does not have access. Always remember that the holy city is a society dedicated to God and to Jesus Christ.

As such, *nothing unclean (or impure) will enter the city, ever* (v.27). Nothing that is sinful, nothing that would even in the slightest form offend, grieve, or anger the most holy God. There is absolutely no place for those things. And this means that there is also no place in the New Jerusalem for people who persist in doing those things.

John talks about folks *who do what is detestable or false*. That covers anyone who leads a morally shameful life, but also anyone who rejects the truth of God's Word and who resists his grace in Jesus Christ.

Yes, access to the city of God, joining the redeemed mankind is free. But only for *those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life*, those who repent and are registered as belonging to the Saviour Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you wonder, by that time, when the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven, will there be any people left that might try to get in, but need to be refused? Is that what is behind v.27?

The answer is 'no'; v.27 does not picture a last-minute final selection at the gate. Like something that can happen when you are about to board a plane. You are already in the line-up for the gate, and your name is announced. You go to the counter and an official tells you, "Sir, you're not boarding. Your ticket is not valid."

No, v.27 is a warning, a very urgent and serious warning for us today. Here and now, you and I must remember that no one will be able to live the good and eternal life in God's holy city, just because he happens to be white, or wealthy, or a westerner... or the opposite of all those things. Or just because we happen to think about him or her as a good and nice person, or whatever.

No, no, there is only one criterion. And that is the same for everyone, whoever you are; wherever you come from; whatever you look like; whatever

has been going on in your life. Here is the decisive question: Are you clean or are you unclean?

Are you registered in the Lamb's book of life, or are you not?

And always keep in mind that this is not about your own achievements or qualities. You can only become 'clean' through the blood of Jesus (Rev. 22:14). And this too, is the same for everyone. There is no exception. Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins is the only sure way to be registered in the book-of-life.

P ARADISE RESTORED

There is more to see within the walls of the New Jerusalem. John's tour-guide continues to show him other aspects of life inside the holy city, aspects that make for a really good life. And what is then brought into view before John's eyes, and through him before our eyes, is truly amazing. What a fantastic picture this is. Powerful symbols to explain what we cannot imagine!

..... the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city....

Do you remember the enormous size of the holy city John was seeing (Rev. 21:15–17), and then the street of the city, made of pure gold, transparent as glass (21:21)?

Well, now John also sees a river. This word 'river' highlights the connection with other rivers mentioned in the Old Testament (see Genesis 2:10; Ezekiel 47 and Psalm 46:4). This one flows through the middle of the street. Technically, that would make for two streets already. This helps us to recognize that the singular 'street', 'river', and later on also 'tree', are used as collectives. They stand for many streets, rivers, and trees, all over this huge metropolis.

So yes, this makes for a spectacular view: rivers of crystal clear water, flowing down through the New Jerusalem, alongside streets of pure gold.

And then this water, called *the water of life*, is water that makes alive, gives life, and sustains life. And it can do so, because it is absolutely pure, totally

unpolluted. The metaphor is simple, but clear. This water is a symbol of eternal life and spiritually pure life, eternal salvation.

Think of Jesus, who in John 4 and 7 speaks about himself as the source, the well-spring of living water. In him God fulfills what we read in Ezekiel 47: *Everything will live where the water goes*. In Ezekiel's vision the river streams towards the Dead Sea. It goes where death rules. But wherever the river goes, death disappears, and life begins to flourish.

Ezekiel sees the river flowing from the temple. John sees it flowing *from the throne of God and of the Lamb*. But it tells the same truth; God Almighty is in Jesus Christ the abundant source of real life. From him alone comes the never-ending supply of living water, life that is stronger than death. And only in the intimate fellowship with the living God, through Jesus, will we ever overcome death and live the life that is truly the never-ending good and perfect life.

And there is still more. John's final vision is full of great pictures of life in God's glorious future. There is also *the tree of life*. We hear about such a tree in the Old Testament as well (Genesis 2 and 3). Here, in line with Ezekiel 47, it sounds like there are many trees. The rivers and streets of the New Jerusalem are lined with rows of trees, trees of life. It is a picture of a garden, a park with tree-lined avenues.

We see Paradise restored, but then in a way that goes far beyond the bounds of the first paradise. God's new creation is a marvellous orchard of trees-of-life in the midst of a huge city that fills the new world.

Indeed, that is what it is, an orchard. These are all fruit trees. But these are the most miraculous fruit trees you have ever seen; twelve times per year they produce an abundant crop of fruit, and twelve kinds of fruit (see also Ezekiel 47:12).

What an incredibly encouraging image of God's loving care as he ushers his church into eternal life. When Christ returns, his completed church will be there, gathered from all over the world as the New Jerusalem; a huge city with a multitude of inhabitants, too many to count. And no one will get hungry or thirsty, ever!

These amazing fruit trees are the permanent source of nourishment that sustains all the folks in the holy city for ever and ever. It is a symbol. And it shows us that in Jesus, God himself will sustain the good life of his children in ways beyond our wildest dreams and imagination.

But these trees not only provide food. *The leaves were for the healing of the nations.*

We know that God's new creation will be free from all misery. In that sense, strictly speaking, the nations, the people that inhabit the New Jerusalem, do not need healing.

But in this way John's final vision reinforces again the deep contrast between the world as we know it today, filled with suffering, pain and death with the future world filled with the fullness of life. The fullness of eternal life God has in store for us will take care of everything we struggle with today. He will remove the scars. He guarantees your physical and spiritual wholeness.

So, step by step, we get this grandiose picture of the good life that is coming when God completes his building project, his church, and brings us all together in his new world.

And here is the deep meaning of all this. Look at 22:3a. Here is what makes this grand project of Paradise Restored possible. *No longer will there be anything accursed...*

Do you remember God's devastating curse that struck the world after we fell into sin? Because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it has been abolished. Gone forever! Recognize the superabundant character of your salvation in Christ; Genesis 3:14-19 will be totally reversed. Man's exile from paradise will be entirely undone. No one in the New Jerusalem will ever be on his way to death and destruction.

Are you still with this? Your God promises you a new world, a world which he shows you as a huge city, which is at the same time a most beautiful and lush garden that sustains life abundantly. It is a city that is totally different from all the cities we know. Our inner cities are often dark and depressing places but not gardens.

Here is the question: What makes this city so entirely different; a place where huge crowds live the good life in paradise restored?

Here is your answer: in the very centre of the holy city, the new heaven and the new earth is *the throne of God and the Lamb*. It is the grand throne of Rev. 4. This throne, evidence of God's Majesty, Authority and Power will be the heart of the New Jerusalem.

Everything and everyone in the city, and that means everything and everyone in the glorified church, depends on the sovereign power of God's deep love in Jesus. He gives life. He sustains life. He brings about the beauty of his new creation. He distributes the blessings of his grace.

What does that mean for those who will live in the New Jerusalem, those who will live the good life in paradise restored? What is that going to mean for you and me, when we enter the holy city, where the throne of God and the Lamb is in the centre?

John lists five things.

1. *His servants will worship him* [3b]. The sole purpose, the ultimate goal of the servants of God and of the Lamb Jesus Christ, that is you and me and all believers, will be nothing more and nothing less than serving, worshipping God Almighty and the exalted Christ for ever and ever. How? Always, everywhere and in whatever you do. It is going to be your joy that his desire is going to be your deepest desire. You are going to fill the New Jerusalem with never-ending praise and worship to the glory of God's name. And if that is what we are going to do, we better start practicing today.
2. *They, the believers, will see his face* [4a]. In a most intimate relationship, you will enjoy God's love; you will experience his goodness and gracious presence; and you will know him as never before. This is a magnificent promise. The full awareness of direct and personal communion with God will be yours. Here is what the good life in the New Jerusalem is really all about. It will not get more awesome than that.

3. *His name will be on their foreheads* [4b]. It will be abundantly clear that he claims you for himself. He expects you to be fully dedicated to him at all times in whatever it is you will be busy with.
4. *The Lord God will be their light* [5b]. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, you will walk in the bright light of God's glory, and you will never tire of it. For it means that the frightening darkness of today will be gone forever. And you will not need any other light to find your way in life.
5. *And they will reign forever and ever* [5c]. Yes, indeed, you will share in his royal glory and power as kings and queens in your Father's new creation.

Do you not feel overwhelmed when you try to fathom the depth of your Father's love and grace in your Saviour Jesus Christ? Try to imagine what all this will be like. Oh – to see him face to face...!

- 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

- This passage speaks a few times about God's glory in the New Jerusalem. How do we reflect God's glory as church today?
- How should you reflect God's glory in what you say and do, today?
- 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?
- 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

- 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?
- 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?
- 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.

4. How can you be sure that your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, so that you will not be thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur (21:8 and 27, see also Rev. 20:15)?

Chapter 34 – Revelation 22:6-21

1. This last section of Revelation mentions seven times “this book”, and stresses the reliability, the trustworthiness of this book, and therefore the urgent need to “keep this book” or “the prophecy of this book”. Why is this so important and how do you do that?
2. In this closing section of Revelation the glorified Christ stresses three times: *I am coming soon*. Does that strengthen you in your faith? How? Compare 2 Peter 3:1-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:58. And what does this mean for the task of the church in this world? See the whole of v.7 and v.12.
3. What does it mean to be “thirsty for the water of life”?
4. How does it show in the way you live your life, and how should it show in the life of the church, that we are longing for the return of the Lord Jesus?