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REVELATION 21: 9 – 21

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## ADMIRE THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE NEW JERUSALEM

The individualistic culture of the time in which we live, makes for some real challenges for the church today. Yes, we know how important the church is in the Bible. But it can become difficult to get excited about the church.

And what we read in this part of Rev.21 does not make it easier. Sure, we read about these wonderful, glorious images. But it all sounds so strange, so foreign to us, does it not? How do we relate to a hugely oversized city of gold, decorated with jewels?

Now, let us think of the church as God's building-project in this world. For a big building project an architect often presents, with the drawings, also what is called an 'artist's impression', or 'architectural rendering'. That is a picture of what the final result is going to look like. And it looks beautiful, it looks great!

But then you go to the construction site, and all you see is a hole in the ground. It has been raining, it is muddy and messy; building material is laying everywhere. And you wonder if it is ever going to look like the 'artistic picture'.

So it is with the church. Here, in Rev.21, we have in John's final vision, the 'artist's impression' of the church. And it looks great.

But today, we are plodding along at the construction site of the church. And it does not always look that great. It can get pretty messy. Sometimes the construction guys disagree on how to move forward. Sometimes they want to change the drawings of the Architect. Sometimes a crew walks away to start from scratch elsewhere.

Is this project going anywhere?

But then, look again at the 'artist's impression' and be encouraged by what you see.

Take a step back and admire the architecture of the New Jerusalem

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## ITS AMAZING DESIGN

In this passage the apostle John is given the opportunity to have a closer look at what he initially saw in v.2. This is his final and most awesome vision of the whole book. The purpose is that each one of us becomes fully aware of the magnitude of what is happening on that day, the day of God's Last Judgment.

We see that an angel presents himself to John as his tour-guide. This is not for the first time, of course. But when you read v.9 and 10 does it not strike you as something we've heard before?

Here it is: *Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk. And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.*

This is Rev. 17:1-3. There is a remarkable similarity between this passage, and what we hear in 21:9-10. Both angels belong to the same category. And both issue the same invitation: "Come, I will show you... a woman". Both

times these women turn out to be cities as well. And in both cases John has the same experience: He is carried away in the Spirit to have a good look.

At the same time, what seems to be so similar, is meant to expose the deepest and most dramatic contrast you can think of. Yes, it is about two women. Both adorned with gold, pearls, and precious gemstones. The one is called the great prostitute, also the city of Babylon. The other one is called the bride, the wife of the Lamb, also the holy city, the New Jerusalem.

At first sight someone might wonder whether there is really so much difference between these two ladies; between Babylon and Jerusalem. Is there really so much difference between the church and world?

But by putting these two visions close together on the day of God's judgment, introduced by identical tour-guides, the Holy God exposes the opposite. The bride of Christ is everything the prostitute is not. At the last judgment everyone will see and acknowledge that the worldly, antichristian culture of Babylon is the absolute opposite of the New Jerusalem.

And we know what happened. In Rev. 17:3 John is carried away in the Spirit into a wilderness, to witness the horrible end of Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes.

In this passage in Rev. 21 he is again carried away in the Spirit, this time to a *great and high mountain*, a place that gives him a good view of what God's grace is doing when the victory of Jesus Christ is being completed.

From this mountain he is shown *the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God*. Here is no darkness. It is a scene of incredible beauty and splendour. The city is 'holy', fully dedicated to God. And it's called Jerusalem, as the place where God dwelt with his people, the old city of peace. The prophets have said marvelous things about its great future (Isaiah 54:9–17).

Interestingly, John was promised to see *the bride, the wife of the Lamb Jesus Christ*. But what he is actually seeing when he gets there, is this city. However, just as in Rev. 21:2, these are obviously two images for the same thing. Both represent the church of Jesus Christ, as it appears when Jesus returns.

Yes, you can also talk about the church today as the ‘bride of Christ’. But today she is still preparing herself for the marriage feast to come. And you can also call the church today a ‘holy city’. But today it is still under construction; it is an ongoing project.

However, in this vision John is shown the ‘artist’s impression’ of what it is going to look like. He sees how the perfect fellowship of God’s people is filling up God’s new world. And it becomes clear that nothing in the whole universe is as glorious as this fellowship, this living relationship that people may have with God.

Indeed, we see God’s artistic rendering of “the Father’s house with the many rooms”, as Jesus talks about it (John 14), and of the city Abraham was looking forward to (Hebrews 11:10). And when it arrives, all God’s children will be there.

So then, let us have a look and admire the amazing design of the architecture John is seeing, and is trying to describe for us.

The first thing he reports is that the city has *the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel*. This is what jumps out when he looks: strong radiance, a bright shine. Like, when you walk in the dark, and someone switches on a strong spotlight, right in your face! This bright radiance is the most spectacular characteristic of God’s holy city.

John compares it with a rare or precious jewel, *like a jasper, clear as crystal*. There is a bit of a problem with the names of the gemstones in this chapter. We have the same in v.19 and 20. The Greek names as we have them in the New Testament time do not always refer to the same stones as we know them in English today. Today a ‘jasper’ is a multicolored gem, not very rare or expensive, and opaque instead of transparent or clear as crystal.

John’s description gives the impression of something like a diamond, sparkling and dazzling, a fitting picture of the reflection of God’s glory.

The Bible speaks often about the ‘glory of God’. It is the majestic brilliance, the magnificence and awesomeness that is associated with the appearance of God, both in Old and New Testament. For instance, when Israel was at Mount Sinai, *the glory of God was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain* (Exodus 24:17), but it was also in the cloud that filled the taber-

nacle (Exodus 40:34). And you will remember from Luke 2 the fear of the shepherds, when *the glory of the Lord shone around them*.

This impressive glory now appears when the holy God comes to live with people. And no longer here or there, occasionally, but permanently. John sees how God's heavenly splendour fills the New Jerusalem as evidence of God's presence.

When the Queen's Royal Standard is flown over Buckingham Palace, Londoners know, the queen is home. So John sees the glory of God shining brightly in the New Jerusalem, and knows, here God is home. The church is his residence.

Next John tells us that the New Jerusalem *has a great, high wall*. If you were to approach an ancient city, the city-wall was usually the first thing you would see.

However, why would the New Jerusalem need a wall? A wall was to keep enemies out, to protect against hostile armies. But when the New Jerusalem comes here, there will be no more enemies. No more need for protection.

That is true. But a city-wall also functions to establish the city as a defined area. It helps people to identify themselves as belonging to a particular community. Today we do not build walls for that purpose, but the idea still exists. Someone might say, "I was born and raised in Hamilton. I've lived here all my life. This is where I belong. When I've been away for a while, I'm happy when I'm back. This is my home."

In other words, the wall John is seeing around the holy city is a symbol identifying that 'the church is a unique community, eternally secure in its fellowship, its communion with the holy God'. This is not meant in a smug way, in arrogant isolation. There is nothing elitist about it.

No, no, the wall has many gates, which are all open, all the time and in all directions. There is a warm welcome for everyone who wants to become a resident of the city. But to get there, you will need to enter through one of the gates. That is the only way in.

That makes it important to have a good look at the amazing design of this wall. For then you will find out what defines the church as a unique community.

When you read v.12-14 it is clear that the whole structure is dominated by the number twelve: twelve gates, twelve foundations, twelve angels, twelve tribes and twelve apostles... So, why the number 12?

It is usually seen as the symbolic number for God's people: in the Old Testament twelve tribes, in the New Testament twelve apostles. Sometimes it comes in multiples, like the familiar 144,000.

And then we see the names of the Israelite tribes and of the apostles written on the city-wall, on the gates and on the foundations. What does that tell us?

There is a hospital in Hamilton, Ontario that has the name "Juravinski". That's because in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Charles and Margaret Juravinski donated \$43 million to healthcare in Hamilton. McMaster University, also in Hamilton, has the "Michael de Groot School of Business", named after the wealthy businessman and philanthropist who donated over \$100 million to the university.

Names on buildings remind us of the people who played such an important role in establishing those institutions that we should not forget them.

So, which names are so important for the church that they should never be forgotten?

Well, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel remind us of the origin of the church. The church is the evidence of God's faithfulness to his old promises. It identifies the universal church of the New Testament as the true Israel of God.

And the names of the twelve apostles tell us that this church is being built on the preaching and teaching of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20). These names are a strong reminder of the apostolic testimony of Jesus Christ crucified as the only basis for our hope and salvation. Only this testimony will usher us into a living communion with God.

Now remember, John's vision shows us God's 'artist's impression' of a city that is today still under construction. So, what does this amazing design mean for us, here, today?

Many Christians like to emphasize that the Christian faith is first and foremost about your personal relationship with God. But when you believe in Jesus as your Saviour, when you commit yourself to serving God and following Christ you become part of something that is much bigger than a personal relationship.

You join the community of the redeemed by grace in Jesus Christ. And this design of the New Jerusalem tells you that you can only do so if you submit to what these gates represent. That is if your personal faith is the faith proclaimed by the twelve apostles.

And when you embrace this, you are grafted into the twelve tribes of God's Israel, the roots of the church, gathered from the beginning of the world to its end.

This is true for everyone. Remember that the twelve gates in the wall are wide-open in all directions. It does not matter where you come from. The great multitude that will live in the New Jerusalem is coming from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. But the only way in is through the gates. By believing in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, you become part of God's fulfilment of Psalm 87. *In Jerusalem are the springs of my salvation.* Nowhere else!

And today, as the building project is still ongoing, it is our job as God's church when doing outreach, mission, and evangelism, to tell people this. To let them know that otherwise there is no salvation, no hope. Show them the 'artist's impression' of the city we are heading for and urge them to join the journey.

And you, are you looking forward to coming home where God is home?

## ITS ENORMOUS SIZE

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John then sees that his personal tour-guide has with him a measuring stick. It is not an ordinary measuring stick, like the one John himself had been given in Rev. 11:1.

After all, this is no ordinary city either. This is the holy city, the New Jerusalem. And the 'rod of gold' fits with the fact that 'gold' is the dominating building material of the holy city and the colour of heavenly glory.

And so, the angel sets out *to measure the city, its gates, and walls*.

Why is that? What is the purpose of the exercise? You can look at it as a survey to determine the exact boundaries, and so to confirm God's title, his exclusive right of ownership of the holy city as his property. That makes it symbolize God's commitment to protect his church and take care of her.

But the next verses show that these measurements are especially significant to impress on us the enormous size of this architectural miracle. And that in turn is then meant to impress on us how great, how generous, how welcoming, but also how awesome and how glorious the One is, who designed it and built it.

This going around to measure the New Jerusalem, is like walking around to count the towers and citadels of the Old Jerusalem. Psalm 48 sings about that as an activity that should not lead to pride in the city's strength or beauty, but to abundant praise of God's glory and majesty.

Well, when this angel is done measuring the city of God, the results are absolutely stunning. It is beyond belief. Which emphasizes even more the symbolic significance of these numbers.

Let us have a closer look. The city's ground-plan is laid out like a square. But it is huge, it is 12,000 stadia long and wide. That is about 2,300 km each side. In Canada this would cover an area from Winnipeg to Vancouver, and from the US border to the Arctic Circle, which is close to 5,000,000 square kilometres. That is an enormous area for a city. The largest cities in the world today are tiny villages compared to the New Jerusalem.

Remember, the number twelve stands for the church, the people of God. And now it is multiplied by one thousand, or  $10 \times 10 \times 10$ , the ultimate completeness and perfection. This completed church is so incredibly large. Again, it may not look all that great when you look at the church today, but God's plan and purpose for his church are immense. We travel to the New Jerusalem as a growing multitude that no one can count.

Think of God's promise to Abraham, offspring as numerous as the sand on the beach and as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5 and 22:17). Indeed, your Father's house does have many rooms, many more than you and I could ever imagine (John 14:2). The purpose of God's love includes everyone who turns to him anywhere, anytime. Do not worry, no one is going to be excluded for lack of space. No one who turns to Jesus Christ will be turned away.

But there is more. This city is just as high as it is wide and long. That is also 2,300 kilometres.

To get an idea how high that is, when you fly from North America to Europe, your altitude above the Atlantic is about 10 or 11 km. The International Space Station circles the earth at an altitude between 350 and 400 km. So, 2,300 km brings you way beyond that, in space!

Most scholars picture this three-dimensional city as an enormous cube. The idea is that it reflects the Most Holy Place in the temple, which was also a cube, overlaid with gold. This is where God dwelt with his people in the Old Testament. In John's vision this Most Holy part of the temple, shaped as a cube, is then immensely expanded. Now the whole city is God's holy dwelling-place, but it still resembles the location in Israel.

However, the picture of a cube is somewhat problematic. It does not look like a city. It is a huge golden box. Where do people live in this box? One could say, of course, "That does not matter. It is a vision and it is all symbolism anyway". Okay, but in his visions John often sees things that he recognizes. Here he recognizes a city, a place where people live, a place with streets, with a river and trees.

An attractive alternative to the cube is to think of this city in the form of a pyramid. Imagine that from his high and great mountain John sees the holy

city built and its inhabitants living on terraces all around on the slopes of a mountain with its top as high as its length and width, 2,300 km.

Do you want to know what this might look like, on an extremely small scale? Look at the city of Gondor in the third one of the “Lord of the Rings” movies. Or travel to Italy and see how villages and towns are built on the steep mountain-slopes of Cinque Terre or the Amalfi-coast.

What is measured next is the wall around the city. It is one hundred forty-four cubits, which is about seventy meters. Whether this is its thickness, or its height is not clear in the original, although most scholars choose ‘height’. Perhaps the number one hundred forty-four is more significant as a multiple of twelve. Again, the number of the church!

But regardless how we interpret some of the details, here is our firm comfort, our great encouragement: this walled city is an eternally safe and secure place for everyone who lives there. This is what your God has in store for you.

You may wonder about that, sometimes. You and I live here, today, in a dark world where the Christian church and the Christian faith is often dismissed as irrelevant. The frustrating experience of being busy with outreach, is that the large majority in our post-modern western society seems to be simply uninterested. And then, in the well-known Hymn “The Church’s One Foundation” we see the picture of a church *sorely oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, and by heresies distressed*. Does God’s building-project have a future? We see so little progress at the construction site.

But God says, “I will reach my goal. Look at the ‘artist’s impression’ I have shown you, and stand in awe! See how big, how massive it is going to be? This is how wide and long and high my love for you is in Jesus Christ.”

## **I**TS AWESOME SPLENDOUR

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But there is more. What God is doing when he completes his church-project, is not only big beyond our imagination, it is also going to be incredibly beautiful. In v.11 John mentioned already the awesome, breathtaking, and dazzling splendour of the New Jerusalem. But a closer look in v.18–21

shows even more spectacular details of its unique building materials and decorations.

The wall was made of, or built with “jasper”, the same crystal-clear diamond-like jewel as in v.11. Think of this 70-metre high wall, with a length of thousands of km, thickly studded with billions of huge diamonds. It is like a sparkling diamond bracelet, surrounding the city in which everything is made of pure shining gold.

Indeed, the whole city is made of pure gold, clear, transparent as glass (v.18). And so are the streets of the city (v.21). The word ‘pure’ or ‘clean’ has a deep meaning here. It is a metaphor for the moral perfection and spiritual purity of the church that fills God’s new world. Think of the pure, spotless clothing of the Bride of Christ, which according to Rev. 19:8 stands for *the righteous deeds of the saints*.

And today already you may experience the beginning of this purity. Oh, I know, it is only a small beginning. But it is real. This is the life-renewing power of God’s grace and love in you. As his redeemed children, purified by the blood of Jesus, the Holy Spirit enables you to begin to enjoy the pure and holy communion with your God, today!

But that is not it. John also has another look at the foundations of the city-walls. He had noticed already the names of the twelve apostles, but now he also sees that these foundations are decorated with all kinds of precious stones. In v.19-20 we get the whole list. We are again reminded that God fulfills the prophetic words in Isaiah 54.

I mentioned earlier how challenging it is to identify these jewels with current English names, because of the different names in Greek and Hebrew. So, we are not going to try that.

But here is the big idea. Reading those names, one after the other, leaves you with an overwhelming impression of the perfect beauty, the super-abundant brilliance of all these bright, sparkling colours in dazzling heavenly light. It must have been totally overwhelming to see such awesome splendour, reflecting God’s glory.

And then there are the twelve gates. *Each of the gates made of one single pearl*. This is absolutely unimaginable. It is over the top. One of the largest

pearls in the world has a diameter of twenty-four centimetres. And here, twelve times, the bright, sparkling shine of the diamond studded wall is interrupted by the delicate lustre of a pearly gate.

And every gate is another open door to a highway into the city, a golden city full of beautiful avenues, avenues of pure gold. It is a super-symbol of the truth that everyone coming home in God's holy city will have unlimited access to the throne of God. Here everyone will enjoy the deepest communion with Jesus Christ possible.

God's creativity in what he shows here, knows no bounds. No words can capture adequately the awesome splendour John is seeing.

The spectacular beauty of the 'artist's impression' of the New Jerusalem is so very encouraging as we find ourselves in the middle of this building-project.

But in the end it has only one purpose. In the end it is not even about the church. No, it is about the beauty, the power, and the majesty and the glory of God himself!

People dream of building a better and more glorious future for their children and grandchildren, for our society. Look at mankind's amazing achievements! We've come a long way, have we not? But it will all fail.

God alone can usher in his great future. And he will! He is the Almighty God who will single-handedly finalize his building-project to the glory of his Name.

Think again of Psalm 48:12, 13. *Walk about Zion...., number her towers, consider her ramparts, go through her citadels.* But the point of the Psalm is not: "Wow, look what an awesome city we have". No, no, it is: "Wow, look what an awesome God we have!"

The same thing is true here. The point of admiring the architecture of the New Jerusalem is not: "Look how awesome we are going to be as church". But it is: "Look at the majesty and glory of our awesome God!"

But this 'artist's impression' of the future is at the same time our challenge today. What do we see as we walk around at the construction site? Do we

look with the eyes of faith? Do we already see some of God's glory in Jesus Christ?

And how do we reflect God's glory as church today?

Is this even our goal as his church in the world in which we live?

And how do we do this? Have you ever asked yourself this question: How am I going to reflect God's glory in what I say and do today?

That's not a bad question to begin with when you get up in the morning.

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.