

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part twenty-eight

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HEAVEN - WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE AND HOW TO GET THERE

Revelation 21:1-27 - "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. [5] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." [6] And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. [7] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. [8] But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." [9] Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." [10] And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, [11] having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. [12] It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— [13] on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. [14] And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. [15] And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. [16] The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. [17] He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. [18] The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. [19] The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, [20] the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysolite, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. [21] And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. [22] And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. [23] And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24] By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, [25] and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. [26] They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. [27] But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. "

The visions of the end continue to come to John, each now becoming more and more centered on the glorious aspect of God's final plan for His redeemed. There are still flashes of warning and judgment, but the dominant note has changed to that of reward and blessing.

1) CREATION RENEWED

Revelation 21:1 - "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."

The very first verse of this chapter presents us with a striking thought: the *passing away of this whole present created order* - **Revelation 21:1** - "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." This verse is merely an expansion of the same idea given to John very briefly in **Revelation 20:11** - "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them."

This idea is not original to John's revelation, and it needs some explanation:

Isaiah 34:4 - "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree."

2 Peter 3:9-10 - "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. [10] But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."

Even Jesus briefly described this end-time conflagration:

Matthew 24:35 - "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

But how are we to interpret these words? I think the Scriptural teaching isn't merely one of the *elimination* of this present order as much as it is a *renovation* of it:

Romans 8:19-22 - "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. [20] For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. [22] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

This is a very important passage. If this present creation were simply eliminated, God's original plan would have been defeated. His plan from the very beginning was not the *replacement* of His original creation, but the *triumph and fulfillment* of His original will for it.

In fact, in a verse showing the *grandeur of Christology*, Paul shows all that God had in mind through Christ's death and atonement: **Colossians 1:19-20** - "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

What outstanding words! This is what God will accomplish as the heavens and the earth are so totally realigned to His original plan through Christ Jesus. Christ's death didn't just provide *forgiveness for your sins*. Ultimately it *restructured the physical universe*.

2) **THE HOLY CITY, THE NEW JERUSALEM, AND THE BRIDE OF CHRIST**

Revelation 21:2-4 - "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Here John merely mentions what he's going to describe in detail in **Revelation 21:10-27**. It is important to notice that this new Jerusalem is pictured as "*coming down*" to earth. Once again this shows that we must not reserve the eternal state exclusively to *another realm* away from this earth. The emphasis all through the Revelation is the coming of God's final triumph and reign *down to a newly redeemed earthly realm*. The final kingdom is not pictured in terms of harps and clouds. God's future kingdom will be very tangible and real.

Now comes the serious question: *How shall we interpret these images of the heavenly city?* What shall we do with the details John gives in the remainder of this chapter? Will this be a literal city, shaped in a perfect cube? Will this new Jerusalem literally take the physical place of the old Jerusalem? If so, some of the details are very hard to put together. How will this cube (measuring 1500 miles on each side) make it's abode in an area measuring barely 60 miles from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea?

My own opinion is John gives us the key to interpreting these details about the new Jerusalem in the text itself. He clearly tells us (two times in chapter 21) that the new Jerusalem is the *bride*:

Revelation 21:2 - "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

And then, even more specifically:

Revelation 21:9 - "Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

So this much we know for certain: the holy city, the new Jerusalem, and the Bride of Christ are the same thing in John's vision and the words of the angel. That fact is very important because it becomes a key for interpreting the remaining details of this present vision.

This interpretation has been established earlier in John's visions. John has already been shown clearly the identity of the bride in **Revelation 19:6-8** - "Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. [7] Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; [8] it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."

The church is always pictured as the *fulfillment* of the Old Testament tabernacle and temple. Believers, through the Spirit, are now the *dwelling place of God Himself*. They form the spiritual *habitation* or *building* in which God dwells with His people:

1 Corinthians 3:16 - "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

Ephesians 2:19-22 - "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

In John's vision, however, there is a key difference in the final manifestation of the dwelling of God among His people. Now, as Paul teaches in Ephesians, we are a dwelling of God *"in the Spirit"* (2:22). That is, we participate in this union by *faith* rather than by *sight*. When God's final dwelling with His people is complete John puts it in the simplest, most intimate description possible by saying, *"They will see His face...."* (22:4). This echoes John's earlier teaching in **1 John 3:2** - "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

3) **ANTICIPATING FUTURE GLORY WHILE WE STRUGGLE HERE ON EARTH**

Revelation 21:5-8 - "And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." [6] And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. [7] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. [8] But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

The attention in these verses seems to shift back to John and his immediate situation on Patmos. *"Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true"* (5). The emphasis here is on building faith in the hearers of these words. God is utterly incapable of failing in the ongoing enterprise of completing the *new creation* process - *"Behold, I am making all things new...."* (5).

These words cause immediate reflection on Paul's words in **2 Corinthians 5:17** - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The new has come. That's a definite pronouncement. But it has not yet come in its final form. The final manifestation of the new creation awaits the return of the Lord. This final manifestation will bring about not only new spiritual life and hope, but the renewal of the physical world itself - **Romans 8:21** - "...that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

To increase John's trust (and yours and mine as well) the voice from the throne of God (21:3), and the voice of the Lamb on the throne establish the ground for confidence in the kingdom's final appearing, even though John and many Christians

since see nothing but trial and tribulation around them:

Revelation 21:6 - "And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."

Just as the alphabet includes the last letter just as surely as the first, so God is not only a God who announces and commences His will and endeavor on earth. He will complete it and fulfill every intention of His heart.

All of this encouragement issues a call to Christ's disciples to *courage* and *faithfulness* - **Revelation 21:7-8** - "The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. [8] But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Again, John is reminded of what he already knows. Before the glories of the end come there will be persecution and trial for all serious followers of the Lamb. Only the courageous and faithful will overcome. These words echo the words of Paul in **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** - "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

4) A DESCRIPTION OF THE NEW JERUSALEM, THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Revelation 21:9-27 - "Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." [10] And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, [11] having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. [12] It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— [13] on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. [14] And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.[15] And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. [16] The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. [17] He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. [18] The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. [19]The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, [20] the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. [21] And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.[22] And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. [23] And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24] By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, [25] and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. [26] They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. [27] But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Very quickly, I take this beautiful description to be largely symbolic because John has already identified the new Jerusalem with the New Testament people of God, the bride of the Lamb, the Church. But now John sees this new people of God in *picture form*.

The details are to show the beauty (jewels and gold), the vastness (the measurements - which total a cube measuring about 1500 miles per side) and the symmetry and completeness (illustrated in the used of numbers John typically uses to describe completeness and perfection) of God's people in their final triumphant condition.

In the middle of all these descriptive details there is a picture with a highly significant meaning - **Revelation 21:12-14** - "It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— [13] on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. [14] And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the

twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

John means for us to see the new Jerusalem, the church, as being the fulfillment of both Scriptural dispensations. We've seen this imagery throughout the entire book of Revelation (ie. “The song of Moses and the Lamb,” etc.) Those of the Old Testament era who looked forward in hope to the coming of the Lamb are participants with those who have been blessed to witness His Death, Resurrection and Second Coming in glory.

The chapter ends stating *positively* what the previous chapter closed with saying *negatively* - **Revelation 21:27** - “**But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.**”