

## **2020 Revelation 21 22: New Heavens & New Earth**

### ***Introduction:***

I am so excited about the passage we're looking at today. It is just so good, you know!? We're talking about one of the most inspiring, hopeful passages in the New Testament; in the entire Bible, really.

So I'm excited for it. Excited for today.

And I am hesitant to even preach today, a little, because we are talking about things so perfectly expressed that in some ways, to describe them more, or to comment on them, seems to bruise the imagery a little. I don't want to steal from us the power of what we see.

Because I think more than anything else John wants to fill us with awe and longing today, with hope & certainty that we can receive all that's promised in these passages. God wants us to understand what we see, grasp it in some way, but more than this, God wants us to want it, to want the life promised to those who overcome.

And we are called to overcome sin and evil's pull, so that we can rejoice in the New Heaven and New Earth and New Jerusalem that is our destiny, which is what we're talking about this morning.

So. We'll talk first about some of the ways Revelation 21 and 22 echo earlier Biblical promises of the world to come, then we'll walk through the passage that was to read us and I'll try to clarify what we see and also address some of the questions that come up when we stand with John from a mountain and look at the Holy City that's our home.

But first let's pray.

***Prayer:***

***John's Influences:***

Remember that I suggested that God speaks to his people in ways they understand. God wants to be understood by us.

If we were given visions of angels, we know what the angels would look like, right? Tall people, white shiny robes, wings out of their shoulders, glitter lotion. This is just what angels look like. We've been shaped by stories & movies and pictures to expect angels to look this way.

But John has been shaped by apocalyptic literature. He's soaked himself with it. Every vision he has is full of echoes of apocalyptic books: Daniel, Ezekiel, and the popular apocalyptic writings of his day. And the visions God gives him are ones he can understand,

that draw on what has shaped him and his congregations, which is why we can talk about the ways these visions echo Old Testament books we know.

But Daniel & Ezekiel and other books aren't the only influences John had. Like most Jewish thinkers, he was also influenced by the great book of Isaiah, and especially Isaiah's vision of what the world will be like when God shows up and finally deals with evil.

And Isaiah's visions were full of promise: promises about the restoration of Jerusalem, about the mountain it was built on, about the quality of life God's people will have. Listen as I pile up some of these promises here:

***“Put on your garments of splendor, Jerusalem, the holy city...” (52:1)***

***“Afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will rebuild with stones of turquoise, your foundations with lapis lazuli, I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. (Isaiah 54:11-14)***

***“Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations--their kings***

***led in triumphal procession.” (Isaiah 60:11)***

***“On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth...In that day the will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:7-9)***

***“The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.” (Isaiah, 60:19-20)***

***“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.” (Isaiah 55:1)***

And of course:

***“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be***

***remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping or crying will be heard in it no more...Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."* (Isaiah 65, portions, 17-19, 24-25).**

God didn't forget these promises, didn't take them away. John's vision of the world to come is a vision into the same world Isaiah saw--but of course, John is standing in a different place, with the church and the Lord behind him and God's Spirit burning in him.

Let's walk through Revelation, and we'll start where the passages I read from Isaiah ends--with "New Heaven and New Earth." As we go, we'll talk about what we see.

### ***New Heaven, New Earth: vv1-4:***

***1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.***

**2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."**

The first thing we see in John's vision is simply that it is a vision of New Heaven and New Earth. When John says that this is what he sees, he brings to mind for us all the good things that we just heard Isaiah share. John returns us to old promises, old expectations that we may have forgotten to have--and if we're his churches, we may have simply abandoned these promises after all the suffering our "coming out of Rome" has cost us.

And I would guess that very few of us lean on these promises the way we rightly should.

John sees a New Heaven and a New Earth, with a New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." We'll talk more about this "Holy City"--again a reference to a vision of Isaiah--in a minute.

And in all this newness God is with his people in a way he hasn't been before, dwelling with them physically--whatever that looks like. Revelation doesn't define it.

One of the greatest complaints Christians seem to have is that God is not touchable, seeable, near; that the Spirit inside them is too fluffy an idea, ungraspable. What we often want is just to hear God and see God and touch God...and somehow, in some way, this seems to be part of the world to come. This puzzle piece of longing is fitted into the picture of life.

And life here is life with no death, and no mourning, no crying or pain. The idea that there is "no longer any sea" points to the end of chaos, of wild places that are unsafe.

The Old Order of things has passed away and with it all its broken parts. I don't know if I have to remind us as right now as we've needed reminded in other times that this present world order, how we structure our societies, is a bad one. And moments in this life when miracles break through the brokenness--when life happens, or joy happens, or peace happens--it is a miracle. Any good thing in this earth is a miracle, because the order of things is directed toward death and failure, grief and pain. It's not that we take for granted joy and peace and life; it's that we're blind to the truth they their existence in a dehumanizing and

diminishing place of trouble and sin is itself a miracle. But the trouble will end, “death & all it’s friends.”

But there are questions--of course there are questions:

### ***vv1-4: New Heaven & New Earth: Renew or Replace?***

There is always the question of if this “New Heaven and New Earth” is a replacement of the heavens & earth we know now, or a renewal. Do we emphasize the continuity between what is now and what will be or do we emphasize the discontinuity between what is now and what will be. Do we emphasize the continuity between what is now and what will be or do we emphasize the discontinuity between what is now and what will be.

Peter, in the second book that bears his name, is all on the side of discontinuity; that what we see around us is all going to burn away, and be entirely replaced. This gives rise to a certain sort of ethic we have when it comes to the world, which is basically a “use it up, cause it’s out of here” position. Too bad for our kid's kids if Jesus doesn't return quick. John’s not as clear, and the “first earth passing away” isn’t all that much help because it’s not technical language, right?

### ***vv1-4: New Heaven & New Earth: Pass Away***

In fact, “pass away” is for us a euphemism for death: people pass away, don’t they? But we know that

beyond death stands the coming back to life, stands resurrection.

And we know that right now, those who die in the Lord are at peace, that they rest in the presence of God, that they surround us like a cloud of witnesses, that they are good in ways we cannot expect, but even they look forward to the resurrection, to having their bodies renewed--probably, because they really want to hug us, because they miss us and love us.

In the New Heaven and New Earth we'll have bodies; we'll live resurrected lives. I'm stressing this because we often forget--we just forget--that we don't look forward to escaping earth, we look forward to creation being made the way it should be. John doesn't lay out a "hope for heaven," like we think of it; he lays out the promise of living in a resurrected world where we ourselves are resurrected, too. Our bodies will be renewed and resurrected, like Jesus was renewed and resurrected. Like Jesus' body, there will be continuity and discontinuity between our bodies now and then. I'll add some boring stuff about that to the psoted message.

We will live in a resurrected world: earth will be like this earth, heaven like these heavens: like them, but very much unlike them, too: because we don't know what a world without death looks like. The idea just doesn't fit our ecology, our system of how things work,

you know? It will be familiar, once we familiarize ourselves with it; but it will be different, because like our bodies that live there, it'll be sin & death free. To have resurrected bodies we need a resurrected world that can contain them.

~~C.S. Lewis once wrote:~~

~~**“Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.”**~~

~~This is good theology, I think: “the world in its present form is passing away,” and although it’s good, sometimes: we know that it is meant to be better than this, and Lewis’ statement highlights the truth that in some ways, how we reckon this earth will depend largely on where we stand as we look back over this life of ours. It is the healthiest person who can look back on their broken childhood and see God’s hand and redemption even in their wounds, and it’s the destiny of the citizens of the New Jerusalem to, I think, look back on their lives in this earth and see God’s goodness here.~~

But we want the mechanics of the thing: “Will the earth be replaced or renewed, and how?” But God

wants to tell us through this vision about the quality of life we'll have in this world to come. The quality of life we'll live.

***Making All Things New vv5-8:***

***5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."***

***6 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 water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."***

We see more of the promise of blessing, drawn from Isaiah, that we've seen already. We see a declaration from the throne, which we would think naturally is God the Father, but doesn't seem to be. This one is the all expansive one, the beginning & the end, Alpha & Omega--the first and last letters of the greek alphabet, if we didn't know. These labels: First and Last, the Trustworthy & True: these are names Jesus takes for himself at the start of Revelation. If we lingered in

these names we'd see some of the greatest hints at what would become the doctrine Trinity--the Father and the Spirit and the Lamb, Jesus--all God, all wrapped together into one being, yet distinct at the same time.

***vv5-8: If you're not a citizen...?***

But the rewards that are described are for those victorious ones, the over-comers--those who have resisted and rejected the evil one, the devil & his doings, and sin; the ones who are thirsty for the "water of life." Their rewards are balanced by the fate of those who have chosen not to take up citizenship in this Holy City: "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Those who reject citizenship in this New Jerusalem receive the same fate as the devil and his minions: a fiery lake of burning sulfur.

This text is in tension with something else we see, though; something that we'll read again next week as we finish the book and talk about living Revelation lives. It's this:

***"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and***

***may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Rev 22:14 & 15)***

John gives us this image of the New Jerusalem as a city with wide open gates because there is no threat to force them shut...but only those who “wash their robes” can enter. A phrase that points probably to our need to wash ourselves “in the blood of the Lamb,” as Revelation 7 puts it. That is, wash ourselves in the permanent washing that comes from Jesus, and leaves us clean.

And so we see two fates, really: On the one hand, these people seem consigned to a lake of fire. On the other, they simply roam outside the city, instead of taking up citizenship within it. So what’s the fate of those who don’t overcome, who don’t “take the free gift of the water of life” as John puts it before the close of the book?

I don’t know. I don’t know.

I am simply not sure. Part of it is because the question of the fate of those who reject Jesus is a big question, and it’s answered almost always in metaphor. Jesus and his peers used the image of Gehenna--the valley near Jerusalem that was filled with trash, and

constantly burning--as an image of the fate of those who don't receive his message. We translate "Gehenna" as "Hell." And who wants to spend eternity caught in trash fires, living in garbage, right? Hell--Gehenna--is a powerful image.

John talks about this "fiery lake of burning sulfur." in Rev 14:10 he says their torment is eternal, and it's an image gathered from all over--passages in the Old Testament allude to it (cf. Sodom & Gomorrah) and popular apocalyptic works of his day talked about things like it.

So I don't exactly know what the fate of those who don't overcome is. John spent the first part of his letter urging his churches to faithfulness, has spent all of Revelation calling them to overcome their complicity in Rome's sin. But John does make something very clear: they aren't in the city. They aren't in the city, and that's the part of their fate that is most important for us in Revelation. New Heaven and New Earth and New Jerusalem: it's not theirs. The presence of God isn't theirs, the water of life isn't theirs, the glory of the Lord doesn't shine on them, and all the benefits that the followers of the Lamb receive, they don't get them.

And honestly, I think that is what is most important to take away from these two images of the fate of those who choose away from the Lamb. They miss out on

the New Jerusalem and all the promises it contains.

***The Bridge vv9-21:***

But let's continue, because although I won't read it again, John is taken to a high place by one of the angels from earlier in Revelation, and given a better view of "the bride, the wife of the Lamb...the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." Names that are only good.

And this passage is wildly symbolic, but John basically seems to be drawing on a vision of Ezekiel's in which Jerusalem is renewed and measured out, a vision that ends with the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after Israel's 12 tribes, and the declaration--which forms the end of the book of Ezekiel, that "*the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE.*"

And there is all sorts of apocalyptic imagery in this vision of John's, of course: The gemstones that the New Jerusalem is built with, the measuring of the city, which points to the ownership and control God has over the city; the numbers themselves--12s and 10s--and the number they make when they're multiplied together, all of which are symbolic of excellence and completion and perfection.

***vv9-21: New Jerusalem? Who or What?***

And if Rome--Babylon--was the devil's prostitute, who was leading the world astray, John says that this city,

this New Jerusalem that is being established in the New Heavens and New Earth; it's Jesus' Bride--a great New Testament metaphor for church itself, right?

And the question that comes up is if in fact this city in some ways is the church itself, being established in this New Heaven and New Earth. And I'm not sure. It could be that John is talking about the church itself when he talks about this New Jerusalem. It does seem, though, that by presenting the New Jerusalem as Christ's Bride, and as having foundations that are the apostles along with these gates that are named after the twelve tribes, the city is more representative of all God's faithful people spanning both sides of Jesus--before him, Israel, and after him, of course, the Church.

What we know is that it is the dwelling place of God and us as well--the New Jerusalem, as one person puts it, is both place and people, God and his people gathered together. It is described as perfect, complete, and wonderful. And John goes on to tell us about the quality of life that we'll have in this New Heaven and New Earth world (cf. bauckham, someplace).

### ***Great Things vv21:22-22:***

***22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its***

**temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.**

**1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.**

~~And~~ the quality of life we'll have as citizens in this New

Jerusalem, inhabitants in this New Earth, it's worth everything.

Look: this last passage echoes Isaiah, draws directly upon the promises of Isaiah: but it goes a step farther in so many ways. The New Jerusalem in this New Heaven & New Earth and New Order: there's no Temple, because there's no need for one, because the citizens of New Jerusalem have utter access to God-- and not access like we have now, through the Holy Spirit, which we discount to our folly, but access in the way that most of us really long for: to be able to see God, hear God, even touch God.

The city God's People live in, that God's people maybe become, is a place where every single good thing necessary for a good life is present: there is enough food, and enough water, and enough medicine, enough light--Darkness has passed away. The darkness of sin and despair and the grave; they don't exist there. All nations are represented. And we remember what else we've seen this morning: The streets are made of gold, and walls of great gems, and wealth that in the old world people killed for here, in this place that's our destiny, is the stuff of buildings. It's not cheapened, it's just common. And the curse--most probably a reference to all the things that came of the fall--it's reversed and undone.

***Toward Conclusion:***

This is what you are going to get. This is not hypothetical, you don't look forward to a day when things might be alright. You are going to get, if you stay the course and overcome, an existence that is full and bright and meaningful and powerful. No grief, no pain, no hurt, no trouble, no fear, no chaos no futility, no embarrassment, and no shame. Only peace and the presence of God, resurrected life in a resurrected world...if only we can overcome.

And we should fight to overcome whatever we need to overcome in order to claim the citizenship in the New Jerusalem that God is holding out for us. We must be counted over-comers. What is in your way, and how can you fling it off and drink deeply of the "free gift of the water of life?"

And I think we could, if we wanted, look at this world to come, this resurrected world, this New Heaven and New Earth, and remember that as long as we keep on keeping on in this journey toward the Lord, it is our home.

***Prayer:***

And If I could make only one prayer for us, it might be that the New Heaven and New Earth vision of John stays in our head like a terrible Pop song, like a lullaby sung to us, like a heartbeat, or the sound of a great wind, and that when we engage with this world and those in it, we don't see just one another and others

and the stuff around us as it is, but we see it *as it might someday be*.

We see others as they might be if only they would choose to enter the gates of the Holy City coming down. We see the world around us not as it is but as it will be when it is made new.

How would you treat others differently, if you kept the promise of your citizenship in the New Jerusalem always before you? How would you reframe evangelism if you remembered that every person around you could for eternity call home a place where there is no fear or pain or chaos or enemy? How would you pray if you couldn't forget that what God wants for you is rest, and enough of all the things that make life worth living, and freedom from hoarding and greed and self-protection? How would you treat the earth around you differently if you knew that it was going to be resurrected someday, too?

How would your life be different if the energizing heartbeat of your life was the promise of your citizenship in the New Jerusalem, the capital of the New Heaven and New Earth, where death has died, and with it everything bad.

Let's wash our robes, enter the open gates, drink deeply of the free gift of the water of life, and not forget New Heaven, New Earth, New Jerusalem, and

the one who says through us to any who would listen that “I am making all things new!”

***Extras: Questions:***

John's vision focuses on the sort of life that God's People will have in the New Heaven & New Earth. It's a symbolic description; what do you see?

Why are we more oriented toward the fate of those who choose against New Jerusalem citizenship, instead of the fate of those who do?

Can we even imagine a world without pain, fear, chaos, want, futility, embarrassment, or loneliness?

If you kept the promise of your citizenship in the New Jerusalem always before you, how would these things be different:

- the way you treat people?
- evangelism?
- prayer?
- what else?

Going Further: Is there a particular area in your life in which you need to be victorious?

For Further Study: Take a few minutes to scan Isaiah 52, 55, 25, 54, 60, 65, & Ezekiel 48 to look at some of the OT promises of God that are echoed in John's

vision.

How would you pray if you couldn't forget that what God wants for you is rest, and enough of all the things that make life worth living and freedom from hoarding and greed and self-protection? How would you treat the earth around you differently if you knew that it was going to be resurrected someday, too?

How would your life be different if you just didn't forget the promise of your citizenship in the New Jerusalem, the capital of the New Heaven and New Earth, where death has died, and with it everything bad.

### ***Extras: Continuity & Discontinuity***

And we know that there will be some sort of continuity between the bodies we have now and the bodies that we'll have then--I'm not going to all of a sudden look like whatever bodybuilder I wished I looked like when I was a super insecure 16-year-old; I'm going to look something like myself, but different, too. Remember when Jesus was first seen after his resurrection? They didn't know who he was at first--they thought he was the cemetery caretaker. He wasn't immediately recognizable as Jesus; but once people got over the surprise, over the differences--whatever they were--they recognized him as himself. He even seems to have scars.

There was both continuity & discontinuity between the body he had before he died, and the body Jesus now has. His resurrected body was both the same and different.

***vv1-4: New Heaven & New Earth:  
Resurrection as a Way Forward?***

And some people are just oriented theologically toward discontinuity, you know: “The church is nothing like Israel, the world to come will be nothing like the world as it is.” I am more oriented toward continuity. Paul, in his explanation of what the resurrected body will be like, tries to strike a balance between these two, and suggests that the bodies we’ll have will be like ours, but also different: recognizable, very much “our bodies right now,” but different, too. He’s of course drawing on the example of Jesus, who is basically our only example.

And it has been helpful for me to draw on the idea of resurrection as a way forward when it comes to the mechanics of New Heaven & New Earth.

***The Bridge vv9-21:***

**9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming**

down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. 14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. 16 The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. 17 He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. 19 The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.

**The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.**

And we could get very much caught here, bogged down in discussing details that are largely not helpful to discuss.