

Revelation 21:9-25
What Happens When You Die: The New Jerusalem
Sunday October 30th, 2016

A story is told about a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his plea and says to him, "Sorry, but you can't take it with you." The man implores the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules.

The man continues to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappears and informs the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars.

Soon afterward the man dies and shows up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. St. Peter seeing the suitcase says, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!"

But, the man says to St. Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checks and comes back saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting you through."

St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, "You brought pavement?!!!"

Today we are talking about the New Jerusalem with streets of gold as clear as glass, with gates that never close made of single pearls, whose sides are 1500 miles by 1500, by 1500, roughly the distance from New York to London. Heaven is indeed a wonderful place. But what does it all mean?

There is a lot of symbolism in the 21st chapter of Revelation, more than we can address in a 20 minute sermon and more than we can understand. We are using human words to describe a place and more importantly a relationship that is beyond words, but let's give it a try anyway.

There are two images used here to describe **the Church**. First, in verse 9 it is referred to as **the Bride of Christ**. This reminds us of the intimacy of relationship we will have with God. Next we see the Church referred to as a city **"The New Jerusalem"** coming down out of heaven. Remember when we die as believers we go straight to heaven and the presence of Christ.

After God brings this age, this world, this universe to a close he will begin another. He creates a New Heaven and a New Earth. The souls of those who have died will have received their new spiritual bodies and descend from Heaven in the New Jerusalem. Heaven literally in this vision comes to earth.

The New Jerusalem is depicted as a cube. It is "four square" 1500 miles on a side. Its foundation would be roughly half the size of the United States. It is huge. Now are these things to be taken absolutely literally? I don't think so, but here is an artist perception of what it would look like.



What is the symbolism of this vast cube telling us? First, that God will be there. A cube was the shape of the Holy of Holies within the temple. It was the place where God met the priests, where God's glory resided here on earth. In the New Jerusalem God himself, not just his glory, infuses the entire city which was holy and pure. In that it is a perfect cube, four square, it speaks of the perfection, the completeness of Heaven.

In that it is so huge it tells us that Heaven and the New Heaven is large enough for all. There is no "max capacity" signs posted on the

back wall by the Fire Marshall. It is open; the Church is open to all who believe.

That is why the doors to heaven, those huge pearl gates always stand open. Salvation is always open to whosoever would believe and come to God. Again, here's an artist's perception of what that would look like.



The wall surrounding the City cannot be seen as being needed for protection. It was only about 260 feet tall up against a city that was 1500 miles high, but again in the Greek it was listed as 144 cubits tall. In the numerology of the day ($12 \times 12 = 144$) it was the perfect, complete height for the perfect city.

In these verses from Revelation there is an underlying theme that speaks to the perfection, the completeness of the New Heaven and Earth. On earth we often beat ourselves up because we are so far from perfect. And the Bible (Mt. 5:48) says, **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** When we are honest we know that is impossible for us to be perfect, but how about complete?

One good translation of the word “perfect” is being “Complete.” We have a course to run here on earth and when we die it's done, it's complete. And we hear God say, **“Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”** The race is over. The victory is begun.

This is reflected in various verses of this chapter and various symbols. In verse 6, which we did not read God says, **“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”** God is the Alpha and Omega in the sense that he is the source of life and the goal to which life, our life goes, not simple the beginning and the end.

The cube of course speaks to that perfection and completeness.



The names of 12 tribes of Israeli over the gates of the City combined with the names of the 12 Apostles on the 12 foundations of the City speak to the completing of the Gospel story. The story of God's redemption of all of Creation that began in the Old Testament is now completed in the New Testament.

Now the New Jerusalem is spoken of as having **“a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper clear as crystal.”** Some teach that radiance in the New Jerusalem, that glow, will be from the presence of the Saints of God. The Light of Christ will be showing through their very bodies giving radiance to the City of God.

In fact it says that no earthly or heavenly light will be needed, no sun or moon or stars. The presence of Christ, the Light of Life will illuminate the place. It will be interpenetrated with light.

There is no temple to be the spot where God comes to dwell, because the entire city will be filled with his presence. It says, **“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”**

No lights are needed **“for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”** It's like a 24 hour circle K. The lights are always on and the doors are always open. I asked a circle K clerk recently why they put locks on the doors because they were open 24 hours a day 365 days a year. I stumped him. But heaven is the same.

The City of God will sit in a new earth and all the redeemed will come and go lit by the glory of God with whom there is no darkness or night, which brings us back to the theme of the family of God.

Now the most important feature, to me, of the New Jerusalem that comes down out of the Old Heaven to the New Heaven and New Earth is that of perfect, complete relationship. The burning desire from Adam,

to Abraham, to Moses and the people of God was for God to be with them, to dwell with them, to be face to face with God.

In the Old Testament you could not see God and live. In the New Heaven and New Earth we will see God face to face and **“See the HOME of God is among mortals.**

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Oh what an expression of perfect relationship and love, and yet it gets even more personable, more familial. In verse 7 it says, **“Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”** We are part of God’s family. We will be inheritors in the Kingdom of God in the New Jerusalem and we... will... be... God’s children.

In Heaven on Earth, the New Jerusalem there will be people from every tribe, tongue and nation as the Bible says. There will be people every age and from everywhere who will come together in a new family, the perfect, complete family of God. I thought as I prepared this message that my experience here at Vista Church, and hopefully your experience, is a taste of this.

There are people here from all over the United States and world, and we have come together here at the invitation of God, and we love one another, and strive to love one another above all else. Above doctrine and previous denomination and experience there is a tolerance here and an acceptance that is my vision of heaven. This is a small taste of what is to come.

In small and yet beautiful way we here at Vista experience what the family quality of heaven will be like. Closer than brothers and sisters, more intimate than husband and wife like the angels in heaven as Jesus said.

Our hope is that we will get to spend eternity with our loved ones. On earth faith and hope and love are so necessary to get us to heaven,

but when we get to heaven hope and faith will no longer be needed. All we hoped for we will have. All we had faith in we will see face to face. The only thing that will remain is love. That is why love is and always will be the greatest of these as Paul said.

God is the source of life and love. God is the goal of life and love. God is love and light and in him we truly will experience that we move and have our being. God is the Creator and Re-creator. We are procreators. When we conceive children we are privileged to bring with God a new soul into being. And if that child dies, either in or out of the womb, that little girl or boy will be with us in heaven forever more as I said in a previous message. Like Jesus, our children are an eternal gift as we believe.

Christianity, the church is truly a social institution. As John Wesley said, **“Christianity knows no solitary religion.”** We live, and work, and serve, and love each other here on earth, and when we die our relationships of love draw us home to God who is love.

Each of us is called to make our individual commitment to Jesus Christ, which is our ticket home to God, but none of us do this on our own and none of us go to heaven alone. We go with our relationships of love. The symbol of this in John’s vision is of course, Heaven, the City of God, the New Jerusalem being one big cube in which we all live together with him.

There are no outlying suburbs, or mansions. Even those depicted as going in and out of the city in verse 25 are depicted as coming and going as “nations”.

God is in the community. God speaks in community and through community, which is part of the reason why we as a community will be going to God for direction on Dream Sunday. And it is in community that we hear the call to turn to him; so that we as individuals and as the family of God can live together forever more.

So I invite you now into a moment of silence to turn your life and hope and future over to God. You stand in the gateway to heaven. You

stand in front of those pearly gates, won't you step through? Won't you in faith step through, trusting that Jesus has forgiven your sins and prepared for you a room, maybe even a mansion in the City of God?

Let us pray. Lord, we want to be with you. We want to be with our loved ones now and forever more. So in faith we come to you trusting in your forgiveness and grace. Please accept us now and usher us into your Kingdom.

In Jesus' name amen.