

Revelation

Part Fifty-Four

New Heaven, New Earth, New Jerusalem

(Revelation 21:1, 2)

With Study Questions

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Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. ² Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:1, 2).

Introduction

David S. Clark writes:

At the beginning of chapter 21, we arrive at the watershed that divides time and eternity...the writer proceeds in this long passage to disclose the glorious abode and the beatific destiny of those whose names were written in the book of life. Our story therefore leads us beyond the confines of this world or this age or earthly affairs to view things in vastly different conditions from anything we know here. The heart of the church has ever beat in response to this revelation of its heavenly home...no sin, no sorrow, no pain, no death...Where can such unearthly features find a place?¹

I played two sports in college. In reflection I realized that I created a bit of defense mechanism by spreading my efforts over more than one team. If my performance waned in one sport, I would (somewhat subconsciously) take comfort in the notion that I always had the other sport. I am not advocating splitting one's devotion here. It's just an observation of how one might secure an identity when things aren't always working out as well as they could.

What I am advocating is securing an identity in that which cannot be disturbed; building one's house on the rock so to speak (Matthew 7:24). At

¹ Clark, David S. *The Message From Patmos*. P. 136.

the writing of this letter, the hub of religious significance was deposited in Jerusalem. There was a deep sense of religious identity associated with being a citizen of Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem had descended to a city that kills the prophets (Matthew 23:37). And its judgment was nigh (Matthew 23:36). Patriotism can be a very good thing. School spirit can be a good thing. Prioritizing and valuing one's family can be a good thing. Commitment and devotion to one's business can be a good thing. But all of these good things can be idolatrous as well.

Great promises were made to Abraham in terms of his progeny-his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:6). But a misguided view of what it meant to be a child of Abraham was a source of great darkness and spiritual destruction. John the Baptist turned the burners up on those holding this ill-advised comfort.

...and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (Matthew 3:9).

One is hard-pressed to find a city (or any geographical location) in the Bible that receives as much attention as Jerusalem. But Jerusalem, and all of the religious structures, artifacts, ceremonies and rituals were merely pedagogical. To focus on Jerusalem is like looking at the photo of a loved one who has moved away for a time-a child who has gone to college or a spouse who has been deployed. The photo should help us remember and love the real person. It should never supplant the real person.

Jerusalem and its temple were getting in the way of the true focus-the genuine hope. It was obsolete and would soon vanish (Hebrews 8:13). And it is not merely Jerusalem. The entire created order needs to know its place.

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New Heaven and Earth

The **“first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”** This fallen world is its own distraction. This is not to say we should not care for the world or care about the world. We should not read our Bibles in such a way as to advocate some kind of continual other worldly floatiness. What it is to say is that we are not to find our hope in this world.

The recipients of this letter (and Christians ever since) need continual reminders of a **“new heaven and a new earth.”** We won’t engage in all the speculation orbiting the nature of this transition². It is not likely an utter destruction followed by another creation *ex nihilo*. I tend to view this in a similar way we would view our own resurrected bodies, i.e., **“raised up with the selfsame bodies.”**³

Paul makes a similar comparison when he speaks of the creation, like us, groaning as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body (Romans 8:21-23). John, little doubt, is writing of the full consummation of that redemption-of that glory. It is our peace. It is our eternal hope. It is our eternity. And yet, in a certain sense, it has already begun.

We’ve been called a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In a certain sense we are already seated with Christ. God has...

...raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

Old Testament references to the new heavens and the new earth are difficult to read in such a way as to consign it entirely to the consummation. We read of the new heavens and earth in Isaiah 65:17. The description includes:

No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed (Isaiah 65:20).

If this is speaking metaphorically of the eternal state, it is a poor metaphor indeed! It is difficult for the metaphor of death (even at a hundred) to mean anything other than death.

² Paul calls the ceremonial ordinances of the Mosaic Law worldly elements (Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8, 20). In Gal. 4:9 he calls them weak and poor elements when contrasted with the great realities to which they were designed to lead.²

³ WCF, 32, 2.

In a certain unconsummated sense, we are currently living in the new heavens and the new earth. Citizens of the new heaven and new earth is that other team that we are on, and it is glorious, strong and unshakable because it is built upon Christ Himself. He is the cornerstone.

And I might add here that our citizenship in this new heaven and new earth, so far from leading us into an ineffective, floaty other worldliness, should make us strong, secure, joyful, confident, bold and a blessing to the current world in which we live.

For years we had a ministry to a certain orphanage in Mexico. We would load up our vans with food, clothes, toys and other supplies and drive across the border. I recall the young woman who was spearheading this project commenting on what those children must have thought about where we came from-where we live. What kind of land do you live in where you can show up with all this loot!??

In one sense we can from America. It has been a very prosperous nation; historically (at least recent history) known as a blessing to the world. But in a deeper sense we came from an entirely different kingdom. The kingdom of God.

There is a great mistake people make when it comes to the kingdom of God. I even hear this error from seminary students. When we speak of the effect the Christian faith should have upon society, they will quote Christ in John's Gospel where He said, "**My kingdom is not of the world**" (**John 18:36**). It has become common to understand this to mean Christ's kingdom is not *in* this world or is to have negligible effect upon the world.

Of course, that is not what Jesus said. Our van was not from, or of (it did not originate) a little orphanage in Mexico. But it was very much in, and hopefully, having an effect upon those orphans. As Christians, we should (if you'll allow the metaphor) be vans filled with blessings for the world in which we currently live.

Philip Schaff writes of the magnitude of these blessings:

Religion is not a single, separate sphere of life, but the divine principle by which the entire man is to be pervaded, refined and made complete. It takes hold of him in his undivided totality, in the center of his personal being; to carry light into his understanding, holiness into his will, and heaven into his heart; and to shed thus the sacred consecration of the new

birth, and the glorious liberty of the children of God, over his whole inward and outward life. No form of existence can withstand the renovating power of God's Spirit. There is no rational element that may not be sanctified; no sphere of natural life that may not be glorified.⁴

New Jerusalem

And at the heart of this is the New Jerusalem. The old Jerusalem had become like the world. The **"Jerusalem which now is"** Paul wrote was like the children of Hagar (these would have been fighting words for the Hebrews-to be called children of Ishmael). They were **"in bondage with her children"** (Galatians 4:24, 25). Bondage is the nature of all man-made religions-whether they call themselves religions or something which sounds more sophisticated. But there is a different, freedom-bearing Jerusalem.

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother (Galatians 4:26).

There is no true peace or freedom found in any city or nation-even in the city whose name means city (or foundation) of peace. This New Jerusalem was the city that Abraham was looking for.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

We are not merely in that city. We are that city. Here is an example where the semiotics of Revelation force us away from a wooden literalism. For the city is also a **"bride adorned for her husband."** It should not be mysterious to us that this is symbolic of **"Christ and the church"** (Ephesians 5:32).

The life of a church is, at it were, the aisle of a wedding, a voyage of sanctification. Husbands are called to live and die for their brides. To sanctify her. To cleanse her with the **"washing of water with the word"**

⁴ Gregg, S. Revelation, Four Views. P 291.

(Ephesians 5:26). At the end of this processional, she is to be **“without spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).**

We will speak more of **“the tabernacle of God with men”** in our next meeting. For now, let us be assured that by faith we are cherished **“members of His body” (Ephesians 5:29, 30)** and called to live as such.

Questions for Study

1. How do you find yourself securing your identity? How should you (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the significance of Jerusalem in the Bible (page 3)?
3. What is the new heavens and new earth? In what way is it currently present (pages 3, 4)?
4. How should your citizenship in the new heavens and new earth affect your life and the lives of those around you (pages 4, 5)?
5. Contrast the two Jerusalems of which Paul writes (page 6).
6. When the Bible speaks of the church as a bride, what the implications (page 6)?