

REVEALED

Part Fourteen: *Revelation 21:1-22:5*

The City is the Church

1. The Outside

2. The Inside

3. The Eternity

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West Valley Church
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**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Fourteen: Revelation 21-22¹**

Just a couple of years ago here in town, a local developer purchased a strip mall and some adjacent property on Nob Hill between 24th and 28th and began to develop it. You'll remember, first they moved the Red Robin just a little ways over, then they began to remodel the old Red Robin space, they cleaned up the existing structures at the back, and then they began building new buildings that would hold new restaurants and businesses. I know that for years, everyone had hoped that the space would be developed since the old Montgomery Wards store closed back in 2000. The excitement grew each week as rumors flew about what stores might occupy the spaces that were being constructed. The developers started a Facebook page with updated pictures and hints of what companies might be signing lease agreements. The "likes" on the page continued to rise as opening day became inevitable. Now we've got some great new restaurants, some new businesses, and there's still speculation about what will go into the large retail space where the old Ward's building used to be. I tell you that as a comparison because the community excitement that grew with the approach of opening day with Rainier Square pales tremendously in comparison to the excitement that Revelation 21 and 22 holds for us as we see the newly built...

"New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride
beautifully dressed for her husband." (Revelation 21:2, nlt)

This is going to be incredible, and I pray the Spirit will give us the eyes to see it.

Today we are closing in on the completion of our summer long series looking at the chapters of Revelation. Our goal has been to engage you in reading the Scripture, inviting you to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you in preparation for our times together in the book. We wanted to help you learn how to read not only Revelation, but the Bible as well, and we wanted to point out clear teaching while dispelling the rumors and myths about the book. We've tried to anticipate your questions, but we've also reserved a time to answer any questions you may still have or that we couldn't answer. In two weeks we will conclude with a panel discussion of the pastors, answering questions you've submitted. Please – if you have any questions,

¹Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/arkedbythelamb/>); Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 21:9-14*, Biblical Theology BIBL7560, Northwest Nazarene University; George Lyons, *Revelation 21-22*; John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

fill them out on the card provided, or email them to us so that we can answer them for you in two weeks.

Has this series been helpful? I pray so. Let's take a look at the chapters for today. Once again, I'm going to assume that you have read the chapters, which will save us some time. If you haven't, you'll want to go home and read them and then re-read this sermon from the manuscript posted on our westvalleychurch.com site or listen to it again. Embedded in the manuscript I've got many Scripture references listed that we won't have time to discuss, so you can do a deeper study of your own. Whether you've read it or not, you might want to open your Bibles to Revelation 21 and 22.

Also, if you weren't with us last week, I need to encourage you to read last week's message, and the accompanying transcript of a message from Dr. George Lyons that we've posted. Those four chapters are some of the most controversial chapters in the entire book, and we had to cover them very quickly last week. Many of you weren't with us, so you'll need to read it because today's reading refers back to that narrative in several key areas.

There is no doubt that in these last two chapters is the grand finale; all that we've read about, been warned about, all that we've seen and heard and tried hard to figure out and understand has been leading us to this. John's intent was to make his readers homesick for a place they'd never been.² He wanted to show them that it was going to be worth it to turn their backs on Rome and the idol worshipping systems of this world. This image is incredible; it is breathtaking to read about; and I can't imagine what it was like for John to see it and try to write it down. Dr. Carol Rotz, one of our leading New Testament scholars, says this:

"John struggles to express the immensity, perfect proportions, and magnificent other-worldly beauty of the 'New Jerusalem.' This perfection represents the glory of God's eternal, intimate relationship with humanity."³
"In the face of a world in which men and women sell their souls for money, John portrayed a world in which gold was so insignificant they paved the streets with it (Revelation 21:21)."⁴

There's something there that I want you to realize and understand, because it is vital to interpreting the vision of the New City. John describes New Jerusalem as a city that is a giant cube, descending from heaven and landing on earth.

Now, we've said all along that we can't take the apocalyptic imagery and symbolism in Revelation literally, but I'll say it again: we can't take these symbols literally! Let me repeat what I said last week: "John's purpose in writing Revelation is *theological* more than it is *historical*. John knows that Satan is real and that Satan is the source and power of evil in this world. John is *not* saying that Satan has the body of a dragon, or that a physical chain can be used to bind him. John does not want us to

² Lyons

³ Rotz, pg 306

⁴ Lyons

speculate on where the abyss is. We should not use John's powerful spiritual images to represent physical or temporal realities.

John uses time frames and physical images to represent *spiritual* realities. When John said that the destruction of Babylon will take 'an hour' he didn't mean 60 minutes. He meant a short time...You can't find the millennium on a calendar. You can't find the Abyss on a map. You won't reach heaven by climbing in a rocket to space and you won't reach the abyss by digging a hole. John's reference to time is to point us to a reality that is *beyond* time!"⁵ Well, the same thing is true here: when John talks about the City of the New Jerusalem, it cannot be taken literally "by any stretch of the imagination."⁶ In a minute I'll explain what everything means, but let me just say this: think about the dimensions that John gives us of this new city. It is a cube (like a giant Rubic's cube [a reference for all you nerds] or the Borg space cube from Star Trek Next Generation [a reference for all you sci-fi nerds. And might I say, while I have your attention, thanks for coming out of your parents' basement and being at church!]). According to John's description, the New Jerusalem is massive: 1,500 miles long by 1,500 miles wide by 1,500 miles high. To put that in perspective, it would look like this (picture of the globe with a cube on it). As Dr. George Lyons has said, "Let's ignore what such a massive structure might do to the earth's rotation on its axis"! "This nearly 800,000 story apartment building will present serious challenges for those residents who live above the 800th floor. Forget the elevator... At the 8,000 feet level residents are going to need oxygen and pressurization,"⁷ and the top floor of this structure is over 1300 *miles* above *that* level! Imagine a 1500 mile cubed cube. By the way, it is about 1500 miles from Jerusalem to Rome, and remember that Rome – Babylon – represents evil in the world. There is likely some significance in that distance that speaks to the authority of God's city.



So here's a key that's going to help you as we spend our time together discussing this. Forget the literal interpretations. John is not describing this so that we would "break out our calculators," as Dr. Lyons puts it, "but to contemplate the magnitude and attractiveness of the Church God has in mind."⁸ In other words...

The *City* is the *Church*

"The understanding that the city *represents* the (church or the) saints and their relationship to God influences the interpretation of its depiction, including the (internal and) external description, which we shall explore. So caution should be

⁵ Daniels

⁶ Lyons

⁷ Lyons

⁸ Lyons

expressed to not consider John's explanation to be a literal physical dimension of the city. (One scholar states,) 'Symbolical descriptions ... should not be pushed beyond the idea which they are designed to convey.'⁹¹⁰

So John is taken to a high mountain to see the New City. This is a direct contrast to the chapters we looked at last week when John was taken to the desert to see the destruction of the city of Babylon, the great harlot. John sees a new heaven and a new earth. The word "new" applies to quality and not chronology; in other words it is new in the sense that it is different, not that it is "next."

We're told there is no more sea, or ocean. The lack of any ocean is a powerful symbol. The sea represents chaos. In the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis, it says,

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was *formless and empty, darkness* was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2, niv).

The darkness represents chaos and evil. So the absence of the sea in the New Order may signify God's victory over all that the sea represented in ancient thought, including death, grieving, crying, and pain.¹¹ The fact that the city comes *down from God*, out of heaven, directly contrasts it with the city of Babylon, made by humans under the influence of the dragon. It is also important to compare the size of the New City, built by God, with the Tower of Babel, which was in Babylon (Genesis 11:1-9). Remember that story? The Tower of Babel was mankind's attempt to achieve God status, so they built a tower that scholars say was close to a mile high. The City of God is 1500 times that in height, depth, and length. The comparison is intentional. Remember from last week, Babylon is a city and a prostitute, while here the New Jerusalem is a city and a bride. Babylon is clothed in gaudy dress that represents her evil deeds. The New Jerusalem is dressed in her righteous acts. Babylon is a prostitute riding the beast; the New Jerusalem is prepared in her wedding dress for her groom, Jesus Christ, ready for the wedding banquet. Are you seeing the intentional contrast between sinful humans following the dragon, and saved believers who are followers of Christ? *The New Jerusalem represents the Church.*

And don't let it slip by you that the City comes from heaven; what that's telling us is that *God brings his dwelling place to earth, among his people.* Being here, among us was where God was before Adam and Eve sinned. Ever since then God has always promised to restore us, and come back to us (Numbers 10:11, 17:7; Ezekiel 37:27; Leviticus 26:11-12; Zechariah 2:11, 8:8). When it says in verse 3 that "God himself will be with them," the literal translation is actually "God himself with them will be their God." The phrase "God himself with them" should sound familiar to you, Christian. That's because it is one of the names used for Jesus: "Emmanuel, God

⁹ Lange, pg 385

¹⁰ O'Neill

¹¹ Rotz

with us.” (Isaiah 7; Matthew 1:23) A better way to translate it would be to say, “God-with-Them himself shall be their God.”¹²

Here’s something beautiful and poignant: the ever-present presence of the tender and loving God means that he will personally wipe away your tears; not that God is some kind of divine Kleenex-dispensing nose-wiper, but it means this: that once God wipes away a tear of grief or loss or sadness or hurt, *it is gone forever*. Because of his presence, *everything* associated with the evil and chaos of sin is *gone*; there will be *no more* death or mourning or crying or pain.

In the midst of this amazing image is yet another call for people to forsake their wicked ways, or in other words, if you don’t leave your life of sin and selfishness and turn to Christ, you won’t be able to experience the loving presence of your tender creator and savior God.

Then God declares that, “I am making everything new.” He’s repeating himself from what he said through the prophet Isaiah (43:18-19, 65:16-17). Again, not “new” in the sense that there is a *next* phase or sequence, but “new” in the sense that there is an entirely *different* quality of life than you’ve ever known before.

Then again Jesus reiterates that he is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega in the Greek alphabet or the “A” and the “Z” in ours. The end is not an event, folks, the end is a *person*. That’s why the Bible says,

“For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Romans 11:36, niv)

(See also 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16)

And God identifies what we all know, deep down – that is that he is the object of all that our spirits strive for:

“To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.” (Revelation 21:6, niv)

(See also Isaiah 55:1; John 4:10-14, 7:37-38; Revelation 7:17, 22:1, 17)

Ultimately, the “reward” that we seek isn’t material wealth, but it is God himself. He will be with us, and we will be with him forever, and he will satisfy every deep longing of our hearts like water slakes our thirst.

Finally, before we get a tour of the city, we are reminded that those who sin will not be allowed in. John gives a list of types of sinners. The list isn’t inclusive as much as it is representational; it’s not that those who only do certain sins are kept out. *No* sin is allowed in heaven. There are a couple of types that are worth noting, though:

“The cowardly” – The reason this is mentioned is because it took courage to stand against the popular emperor worship, especially when you could be killed for standing up for Jesus. All through Revelation is the call to be faithful witnesses for Christ; to be willing to introduce others to Jesus. Not standing up for Christ is a sin. (*Did you see the 20/20 show about Kayla Mueller?*)

¹² Rotz

Another sin in the list that is interesting is “sorcery.” The Greek word for that is “pharmakos,” which is where we get the word “pharmacy” from. It referred to those who used drugs to induce magic spells; those who did this were idol worshippers. Interesting; ask any recovering drug addict if alcohol or their drug was their idol.

Okay, so now we get to see...

1. The *Outside* of the city.

John tries to capture the brilliance of the city by describing it in terms of precious jewels, but even that falls short. But that is how beautiful the church is to God; that is how beautiful *you are* to him.

What’s interesting is that there is a wall around it. When you are talking about a city that is 1500 miles high and wide and deep, why would it be surrounded by a wall that is only about 200 feet high? Walls were often used for security, but that is not an issue now that the enemies of God have been judged. There are twelve gates in the wall – three on each side, so beautiful that they look like they were each made out of a single giant pearl. And the gates never close – there are no doors. So why is the wall there? When we think of walls, they are either to keep people in (as in prisons) or to keep people out (as in Donald Trump’s border wall). But this wall only communicates two things: one is spiritual security. The other is that the Gospel, the Good News of God’s Love to us through Jesus Christ, is open to all nations, in all directions.

Now let’s talk a look at...

2. The *Inside*

There is some clear imagery that holds similarities to the Bible’s description of the Garden of Eden, and that emphasizes what I said earlier about God wanting to completely restore his original relationship to us – the relationship that we rejected in the Garden. And, I might add, that we reject every time we sin.

There is an amazing river that runs through the city, originating from the throne of God and the Lamb. The water is crystal clear – pure in every way – that satisfies our thirst, providing living water to us. The water symbolizes the Holy Spirit who flows from the presence of God to us, also the grace of God in Christ that flows to us, and it symbolizes immortality and abundant life. It flows right down main street. The fact that it is a source of life is demonstrated by the trees that live along its sides. The trees miraculously provide twelve kinds of fruit or twelve crops. Imagine that! We have orchards and orchards that produce millions of apples, or pears, or cherries – all to keep up with the market demands. These twelve trees provide all the fruit we will need, forever. There is fresh fruit every month. Even the leaves from it provide healing for all the nations of the world. Doesn’t that sound incredible: the healing of the nations. Boy if we don’t live in a world whose nations need healing I don’t know what we need. The “twelves” that are a continual theme in the city (it’s dimensions,

foundation stones, its gates, the tribes, the angels, the apostles, the trees, for example), all indicate God's power and authority. The number twelve appears 22 times in Revelation, 187 times in the entire Bible.

The throne of God is in the center of the city. Not on the top floor of the executive suite, not off in a throne room somewhere, but right in the middle among us. And we will worship and serve him and each other forever.

It is mentioned that all those who are in that place have Christ's "mark" on their foreheads. All throughout Revelation, this has symbolized that a person has accepted the character of the name they bear. If the beast's mark is on your forehead, that means you have taken on the lifestyle, and attitudes, and behaviors of the world around you. How do you get the mark of the beast? Simple: you don't have to do anything – just live like the world and you've already got the mark of the beast. But those who have the mark of Christ have accepted his death on the cross as the only payment that will bail them out of the prison and dungeon of sin. They've allowed the Holy Spirit to fill them, to give them the character and nature of Christ.

There is no temple in the city – God Himself and the Lamb are the temple. His presence permeates all of it. Scholar Dr. Lyons points out that "transcendence has been replaced by immanence."¹³ The entire city is a place of worship. And because of the brilliance of God's glory, there is no sun, nor moon, nor lamp to light the night. All is light in God's presence. There is no night to be afraid of or to be lost in. You will always have clear direction and perspective. No more stumbling.

And I want us to see that all of this is for...

3. The *Eternity*

The Bible says that "they will reign forever and ever." The words of this book would have brought incredible encouragement to the original readers. They were facing exclusion from society; unless they renounced their faith, they wouldn't be able to find work, to buy things in the market, and would most likely be tortured and killed – even beheaded. The message of God's final victory and a life of eternity in the presence of the One they were giving their lives for brought them incredible hope and encouraged them to hold fast to their faith and to live for Christ in the face of death and in the light of eternity. Pain, hardships, persecution, and death were only temporary. Their abundant life here on earth and one day forever in heaven was permanent.

Let me just admit something to you: the message of this book will mean very little to you in days of comfort, security, ease and wealth. But in times of trouble, of difficulties, of uncertainty, and persecution, this message means more than the world. Perhaps if you fail to find hope in this description of the New City, you are

¹³ Lyons

too comfortable in Babylon. My friends, you've just seen a glimpse of eternity. Everything you see here around you (except the people) is temporary.

We live in times of growing uncertainty. We've given our national leaders a great deal of power and it has only taken them two centuries to get to this place of irreversible corruption. Don't put your hope in their promises; they will buy your vote and sell your soul to the beast himself.

If you are not a Christian, you are living below the spiritual poverty level. You look around at this world and you think this is all there is, but this is all *temporary*. There is an eternity that outweighs, outshines, out lives it all. You can live in and for that city.

If you are a Christian, your citizenship is in that city, not *this* one. Live in this one *for* that city. The only thing that lasts in this world is the people around you. You can populate that New City with the people you know. Time is running out, eternity is getting nearer all the time. Don't let anyone miss out on it! Introduce them to the one that Revelation is all about: Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain for them before the world was made. The New City is a reality! Live as if you are already there. Love and serve God, love and serve people. Introduce people to Jesus!

Next week we will conclude this series, and we will see that the end of the book says...

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life...Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22:17, 20 niv)

That phrase, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” is one of the earliest recorded prayers. From the very beginning, Jesus people have been anticipating his return. The Apostle Paul wrote it in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, saying “Maranatha!” (1 Corinthians 16:22, kjv) Come quickly, Lord. It was a prayer that was repeated whenever Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper. It was a constant reminder of his saving death, his living presence, and the sure promise of his return and the certainty of heaven forever with him.

And that is what we are going to do together this morning. We are going to say, “Maranatha; come quickly Lord.” You died for us, we will live for you until you return, no matter how bad things get, even if it means we die for it.

That's why Paul wrote...

“Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death *until he comes again (repeat).*” (1 Corinthians 11:26, nlt)

Pray, give instructions. By coming, you are proclaiming you will live for him because he died for you, and you will proclaim him – with your life and words – until he returns. And he will return! It can be your confession of faith. Maybe for the first time, but for sure every time.