

REVELATION

Study 11: The New Creation

In our previous study, we looked at John's description of the Day when Jesus returns and puts an end to evil once and for all. We discussed John's visions that show that there is nothing Satan can do to stop this and that there will be no replay of the garden. God will vindicate his faithful people, and they will reign over all the earth in a new eternal kingdom that will never be destroyed. John continues to encourage the churches to stay faithful and to patiently endure because God will one day make all things new and dwell with those who conquer in a new creation forever and ever.

In this particular study, we are going to continue reading and discussing John's final vision of this future hope – the new creation. These last two chapters of the book are intended to encourage John's readers that God is at work and is redeeming and restoring his good world. As we read the last two chapters of this book, it is important for us to recognize that the story of the Bible does not end with humanity leaving earth and going to heaven; it ends with heaven coming down to earth. The dwelling place of God will be with man; not man going to dwell with God. This is the hope of the Bible, and John's vision is intended to instill confidence that this is where history is heading.

The New Jerusalem

Revelation 21:9-21

John is transported to a high mountain where an angel shows him a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth like a bride walking down the aisle to unite with her groom. Unlike the great city of Rome that was portrayed as a prostitute who seduced the nations, the holy city of Jerusalem is portrayed as a virgin bride who has made herself ready for her marriage to the Lamb.

This new holy city is portrayed as the ideal city where all human cultures flourish together in peace and harmony. Every other city in human history has failed to be what God intended community to be like, and they always end up being a corrupt distortion of this ideal. As we have already pointed out, when humanity seeks to define good and evil for themselves and relies solely on their own ideas and innovation to build community, the result is always a Babylon-like city or empire.

Then John sees the angel measuring this new city of God which would have immediately reminded his first-century audience of the prophet Ezekiel and his visions concerning the final restoration of God's people. In Ezekiel's vision, he is also taken to a very high mountain where he sees a new city and a new temple. He too is given an angelic tour guide who measures the city and reveals that the new city will be much larger and more majestic than the original city and temple built by Solomon. Then Ezekiel sees the presence of God coming down to fill this new city and hears a voice from the temple declaring that God has once again come to dwell with his people forever.

John intentionally links his vision of the new Jerusalem to Ezekiel's vision of the new city. But in John's vision the new Jerusalem is essentially a thousand times bigger than in Ezekiel's vision! The dimensions given here in Revelation 21 describe this new city as being about 1400 miles in length, width and height. By now we should understand that these measurements are most likely trying to convey a message and not necessarily trying to describe concrete dimensions that are to be taken literally. The city's extraordinary size reveals that the size and scope of God's restoration will be even greater than the ancient prophets imagined.

Ezekiel's vision brought hope that God would restore his people and dwell with them in a city that was bigger and better than anything that they had ever experienced before. John's vision declares that God's final restoration is going to be even bigger and better than that. However, there is a surprising twist that John mentions in his vision of the new Jerusalem, and it is a twist that makes a major statement about God's plan and promise to once again dwell with his people forever.

The New Temple

Revelation 21:22-27

Throughout the entire Book of Revelation, we have been trying to understand the meaning behind all the things that John sees. But here, for the first time in the book, John wants his audience to understand the importance of something that he does not see.

After describing the arrival of a new Jerusalem, John points out that there was no new temple in this new city of God. And he says that there is no new temple because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. The presence of God and the Lamb that was once limited to a particular sacred space will no longer be limited in the new creation. The whole earth will be filled with the glory, goodness, love and justice of God.

John goes on to describe that because God's presence permeates the entire new creation there will be no darkness there, the gates of the city will never be shut and nothing impure or corrupt will ever enter into the city. The nations and kings of the earth will no longer represent any kind of threat but will now come together and add to the glory of the city. The eternal city of God will be the true great city where all of humanity will work together in peace and harmony.

John's vision of the new creation is meant to paint a picture of a future hope that inspires followers of Jesus to stay faithful and to patiently endure their current trials and tribulations right now. It is a visual echo of the apostle Paul's words of hope when he said that our present sufferings are not even worth comparing to what God has in store for us in the end.

As John's audience looked around, things may have seemed corrupt and chaotic, but John's final vision of the new creation brings hope that one day everything will be as it ought to be. Every single threat to human safety and stability (ie. sea, darkness, open gates) will be removed, and those who have been ruled by the beast all these years will then rule with God over all creation.

The New Garden

Revelation 22:1-5

John now sees a river flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the city with the tree of life on each side of the river. John is told that it will produce an abundance of fruit every month, and that the leaves will bring healing to the nations. John describes that this new garden city will be full of God's love and justice, and God's people will reign with him forever and ever.

John's final vision brings the entire story of the Bible and human history to the destination that God had intended from the very beginning. On the first page of the Bible, we read that God created the heavens and the earth, and that he created humanity to partner with him in making the garden experience a global reality. And even though humanity rebelled against God and has continued to try and do things our own way, John's final vision declares that God will stay faithful to his original commitment and will continue to lead human history to its intended destination.

John has seen a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. It has all the characteristics of the Garden of Eden but will be even bigger and better. The serpent will be cast out from this new creation, and nothing painful, harmful or corrupt will ever enter in. The Almighty God and the Lamb will dwell with humanity, and the entire earth will be filled with God's order, goodness, love and justice.

John's vision of a new creation reveals the hope and promise that Jesus has gotten God's plan for humanity back on track and that one day God's people will fulfill their original calling to be images of God who rule with him over all his creation. The message of Revelation (and the rest of the Bible) is not that Jesus conquered so that we can leave this place and go to some other place where God is. The message of Revelation (and the rest of the Bible) is that Jesus has conquered and launched the kingdom of God that will culminate in a new creation – heaven on earth.

The great hope of the Bible is not going to a place called heaven when you die. The great hope of the Bible is that great and final Day when heaven and earth will be reunited the way God intended from the very beginning. This is what the creation is longing for and waiting for, and this should be what we as Christians should be longing for and waiting for as well.

Do you believe that God is going to pull this off – that this is where he is taking human history?

And if you do then how should that impact the way that you live your life and the way that you view the world around you?

These last two chapters of the Book of Revelation portray the great prize at the end of this difficult race that John has been urging his readers to run throughout the first twenty chapters of the book. The hope that we will live with and enjoy God forever in a new restored creation is the ultimate blessing that God has in store for those who read and hear what the Spirit has said to the churches. We must not compromise, get complacent or be complicit with the systems that corrupt this world. We must conquer. We must follow the Lamb if we want to inherit the Promised Land.