

The New Heaven and New Earth

Revelation 21:1-8

You won't really understand Revelation 21-22 if you don't place it in the context of romance. When John sees the holy city, the people of God, coming down out of heaven, she is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." As we've already noted, human history concludes with a wedding day as Jesus and his bride, the church, are brought face to face, with a true blessed eternity before them. This is a romance story.

Anyone who is familiar with the genre will acknowledge that romance stories need to contain 4 basic elements in order to ring true:

- The girl needs to be beautiful and true. She needs to be worthy of a great love.
- The man needs to be heroic – willing to risk his life and able to conquer any obstacles, in order to gain the treasure of his heart. He needs to be worthy of her love.
- And there needs to be obstacles – a battle to be fought, an ocean to be crossed, false suitors, and enemies to be defeated.
- And there needs to be a consummation. There needs to be the final dramatic scene where the lovers embrace and the story ends with the promise of a "happily ever after."

Any romance which falls short of these basic elements will fail to move us. If the woman is faithless, if the man is a coward, if there are no obstacles to face – the consummation will feel cheap and deeply unsatisfying. Why? Because all romance stories are just small, imperfect reflections of the romance we were created for: the majestic love Jesus has for his bride.

The book of Revelation is the story of that great love. The 7 letters to the churches are actually love letters where Christ speaks to his bride, encouraging her to be faithful to their betrothal and prepare for their wedding day. The book then moves to describe the great enemies of the church:

- The great red dragon, who is the Devil.
- The beasts of the earth and sea, which seek to destroy the bride by deception and oppression.
- The harlot of Babylon who makes the world drunk with the wine of sexual immorality and consumerism.

These are the great enemies who hate the Christ and seek to destroy his bride. But Jesus, the Great Warrior King, wages war on behalf of his bride and has gloriously defeated all her foes!

Now we come to the final scene – the consummation.

Dennis Johnson: “The consummation of this romance is what Revelation has been about from the start. The blood and fire, falling stars and trembling earth, the dragon, the monsters – the whole terrifying conflict has been about the divine Husband’s jealous love for his bride, a love so jealous that He will fight all comers in order to have her to Himself, a love so sacrificial that He lays down his life to protect her from every threat and enemy.” (302)

And so, as we come to chapter 21, the stage of human history has been cleared of all evil and every enemy. All that remains is Christ and the church.

In ancient times, a couple would first be betrothed – something like an engagement, but more official. To be betrothed was to be promised to someone, but not yet living together. During the time of betrothal, it was the groom’s task to prepare a place for the bride, a place where they could live together as husband and wife.

This is exactly what Jesus meant when he told his disciples the night before he died, “I go to prepare a place for you.” Now, in the verses of our text, Jesus speaks to the church, describing the place he has prepared for us.

I. A Place (vv. 1-4)

21:1-2 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

A. Continuity and Discontinuity

There is a great deal of discussion concerning the new heaven and new earth. Is it just a cleaned-up version of this world as we know it? Or is it something completely different – an entirely new and different universe? It’s both. The apostle Peter, in his second letter, speaks of the final day this way:

2 Peter 3:10 *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*

Notice, he doesn't say that this earth will be annihilated. Rather, the earth, and the works done on it, will be *exposed* to the judgement of God. Our text says that the "first earth heaven and the first earth had passed away" – but that means there is a "second earth."

I think the best way to understand this is to say that the new heavens and new earth will be **this** earth, but thoroughly transformed. The best analogy might be our own resurrected, glorified bodies. They will be **our** bodies, but radically transformed. We get some insight into the nature of that transformation when we think of Christ's glorified body. There we see continuity and discontinuity. It was truly his body, able to do things like a natural body – he could eat and talk and be touched. It was a real body. But his glorified body was not bound by the common limitations of this world as we know it. For instance, he could appear suddenly in a room without going through the door.

In a similar way, the new earth will be this earth but with new properties, capabilities, and glories. The new heaven and new earth will be this world, the fields and rocks and trees and lakes and mountains that you know and love – but all gloriously, radically transformed with properties we can't imagine, which is why the Bible spends very little time trying to tell us what the new earth will be like. It's beyond our ability to grasp.

Imagine trying to explain to a person who has been blind all their life what fall looks like in Michigan on a perfect day at peak color. How do you describe a scene that is so beautiful it already defies description to someone who has never seen light or color?

And so, we aren't given many details about what the new heaven and earth will look like. We wouldn't be able to understand the concepts. But we are told the essential things!

B. What Won't Be There

The essential difference will be a moral difference. That's the focus of the text when it says, "the sea was no more." The sea, for the ancient world, was a place of chaos and death. Devastating storms came from the sea. Invading armies came from the sea. In the book of Revelation, we are told of the Beast that comes from the sea. It is a place that threatens those who dwell on the land with evil and harm.

But there will not be any evil in the new earth. That's the point. All that is evil, everything that threatens or harms, will be gone. Forever. God had promised this through the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before the birth of Christ:

Is. 65:17, 25 "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind...The wolf and the lamb shall graze

together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

Every vestige of the fall will be gone. Every trace or remnant of sin will be removed. And since we can't really comprehend what that will be like in a positive sense, Jesus tells us what it will be like in a negative sense. In other words, instead of telling us all the new and glorious things that will be there, he describes what *won't* be there.

21:4 *Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*

No more miscarriages, no more stillborn babies, no more children with disabilities and diseases. No more accidents or illnesses that steal away loved ones before their time. No more wars or natural disasters. No more wheelchairs or walkers. No more orphanages. No more nursing homes. No more broken hearts or broken promises. No more lying, no more corruption, no more falling into temptation, no more grieving our own sin or suffering the sins of others. Everything that causes pain is gone – it belonged to this world, which already, in Christ, belongs to the category of "former things."

Every trial, every pain, and every tear belongs to the category of "former things." It is passing and very soon shall be forever gone.

C. What Will Be There

There is only one thing that Jesus tells us will be there. God will be there.

21:3 *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."*

This is the essence of the new heaven and earth – God dwelling with man. The point is that heaven and earth will be one. Heaven is where God dwells and the dwelling place of God will be with man, here on earth. "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

This is the essence of the covenant promise, the divine wedding vow. When a man and woman marry, they promise to dwell and live together as a husband and a wife. And, if you love your spouse, this is precisely the treasure of the covenant – the freedom to live together in this unique, fully intimate relationship for the rest of your life.

Words simply fail here, don't they? If you took every beautiful thing you've ever experienced: the most stirring music, the most magnificent views, the most intimate

moments, the most treasured memories – if you take them all together, it would still be only the smallest, faintest whispering of the full glory of his presence.

If you love the Lord, this is the satisfaction of your deepest longing. If your heart has been awakened by the Spirit to hunger for communion with God, with Jesus – then this is simply the greatest, most precious promise in all the universe. God will dwell *with you*, God himself will be *with you* as your God, and you with him, as his people. You will see his glory. You will see the splendor of his holiness, and join him in that splendor. You will experience with unbroken, unsullied, unending bliss the reality of his love for you. The intimacy of that love is reflected in the tender kindness of his care: *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

II. A Person (vv. 5-6)

21:5-6 *And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”⁶ And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”*

At the center of this text we find the central figure of all that is and all that is to come. Who is the one seated on the throne?? It is Jesus, the Lover of the bride. As victorious King and Lord, he assures us of his purpose: *“Behold, I am making all things new.”* Everything that has suffered and groaned under the weight of sin will be transformed by the glory of Christ’s presence in the new heaven and earth.

Creation is longing for this to occur!

Rom. 8:19–22 *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*

Jesus wants us to embrace this redemptive fact – everything that is not thrown into the lake of fire will be radically transformed and made gloriously and eternally new! **Jesus** will do it! And He wants us to be absolutely certain of it! Notice that Jesus commands John, *“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

Things that are written by God are things that stand, things that must be, and certainly shall be, fulfilled.

Is. 40:8 *The grass withers and the flowers fade but the word of our God endures forever.*

Jesus wants you and me to know, to the marrow of our bones, that he is "making all things new" – that the horizons of our life are not determined by the things we currently see but by the things he declares, the things yet to come, the things he promises to do.

In fact, in order to make our assurance unshakeable, he gives one more magnificent pronouncement: *"It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."*

So certain is this coming glory that Jesus speaks of it in the present tense: *It is done*. The certainty is sealed by the reality of Christ as the *Alpha and Omega*, the beginning and the ending of all things. This is not just a title Christ has taken to himself – it is the definition of reality. He is the beginning, not merely chronologically, but metaphysically. Everything exists by his power and command. He upholds all things by the power of his hand.

And he is the Omega, the ending. Everything exists for his own purposes and his own glory. He is the *telos*, the intended reason and purpose of all created things! As Paul says in

Romans 11:36,

*"For from him and through him and **to** him are all things. To him be glory forever."*

This is not simply Christian teaching, Christian doctrine. This is cosmic reality – this is what is! Jesus is the Alpha and Omega of all things, including all people. Every person receives their existence, their life, from him – the Alpha. And no matter how far people try to run from him in this life – at the end they will find themselves right back at the feet of Jesus – the Omega, the fountain of life for all those who believed in him and a lake of fire for all those who denied him.

III. Promises and Portions (vv.7-8)

In these final verses we have promises of life and death from the mouth of Jesus. They speak of two opposing portions, symbolized by two bodies of water: the spring of the water of life and the lake of fire.

In verse 8 we are told, clearly and specifically, of those whose portion will be in the lake of fire. The cowardly, the faithless, the detestable (most likely referring to sexual perversion), murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars – their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur – the second death. They will experience the presence of God's wrath forever. That is their "portion" – their inheritance, what they receive from God for the life they lived.

In direct contrast to the lake of fire, there is the spring of the water of life. An angel will show John that river in chapter 22.

Rev. 22:1 *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*

This river of life is a symbol of all the love and grace and kindness and goodness of God. And it is freely given to all who thirst for it.

21:6 *To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.*

People assume that heaven is for good people and hell is for bad people. Here we see that heaven is for sinners – just sinners who thirsted for God. Sinners who, by God's own grace, were given a thirst for the Lord. They receive all the love and grace and eternal goodness of God – free of charge!

All those who come to Jesus in faith receive the gift of eternal life.

21:7 *The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*

Jesus, the lover of His bride, is promising us everlasting life in his presence by the free gift of his grace. But he is also calling us then, to wait for him, to be faithful to him, to join him in his conquest as we cling to him in faith.

This promise reminds us that there is a battle to fight. Foes to face. But the victory is already assured. "...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

What should these promises do for you?

1. Comfort and encourage those who believe in Christ.
2. Serve as a marvelous invitation to those who are still in their sin.

Rev. 22:17 *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*