

REVELATION EXPLANATIONS — Chapter 21

compiled by Kevin Jensen for Bible 101 — Summit View Church of Christ — April 2019

YOU ARE HERE

chapter 21 — THE HOLY CITY

THE MAIN POINT

This chapter offers a brief glimpse of eternal life as God has designed it to be – its wonder, its beauty, its permanence. The key symbol in this chapter is the holy city, the “New Jerusalem.” This city is not heaven itself, but the church, the bride/wife of the Lamb. It had once suffered through persecution and the ravages of Satan on earth, but now (after the final judgment) it is glorified and perfected in the presence of God. The church, faithful through adversity in the past, is now rewarded with the indescribably excellent experience of eternal life.

SHORT KEY TO SYMBOLS IN THIS SECTION

The New Heaven and New Earth = God’s new creation for eternal life

The Sea = a place of chaos and evil (as in 13:1)

The Holy City / The New Jerusalem / The Bride = the church glorified in God’s presence

Alpha and Omega = the first and last letters of the Greek language (thus symbolizing the beginning and the end)

The Water of Life = eternal life

The Fiery Lake of Burning Sulfur = hell, eternal death

BACKGROUND TEXTS — Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Peter 3:10-13

21:1-4 – new heaven and new earth

Here the Lord begins to show John a glimpse of what eternal life will be like for God’s faithful people. John describes it as “a new heaven

and a new earth” (heaven here is used in the sense of the sky and the universe, not in the sense of God’s dwelling place). The first heaven and earth, he says, “had passed away.” They have been replaced by something new. In addition, John says, “there was no longer any sea.” As in 13:1, the sea here represents a realm of chaos, where evil dwelled (this symbolic meaning of the sea was common in ancient thought); in God’s new creation, chaos and evil are no more.

Isaiah and Peter also foretold the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. In Isaiah 65:17-25, Isaiah prophesied a future time when Jerusalem would no longer be devastated by its enemies, but would be resettled as “a delight and its people a joy.” God would “create new heavens and a new earth,” a new existence for his people, so that among his people there would be no more weeping, no premature death, no hard work without benefit, and no danger from wild animals. Instead, there would be joy, long life, work that benefits the worker, safety, and a close relationship with God. Here in Revelation, John adapts that description of a new Jerusalem to describe a new existence at the end of time in which “There will be no more death” and also, as in Isaiah, no more “mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

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pearls. All of this beauty is intended to communicate the stunning beauty and value of the church when it is united with Jesus for eternal life. Remember, the city itself represents the church, not heaven. It is the church that is built so beautifully and is descending from heaven in this vision to be with Jesus. If you think the church is a good group of people to be with now, just wait until we're glorified in the presence of our Lord on that first day of eternal life!

- NO TEMPLE (verses 22-23) — The Holy City will need no temple to serve as a place for God and his people to commune, because God himself and Jesus the Lamb will be there personally. The light of their presence will eliminate any need for the light of the sun or of the moon. This is an indication of the close and glorious relationship that the church will have with God and with Jesus in eternal life.

- GLORY AND PURITY (verses 24-27) — The glory and honor of the nations of the earth and the splendor of earth's kings will be brought into the Holy City, perhaps symbolizing that the best traits of the human race throughout history will be found in God's people in eternal life. The nations, within the Holy City, will walk by the light of Jesus, the city's lamp — meaning that God's people from every nation will follow Jesus faithfully. In ancient times, city gates were shut at night for safety, but in this city there will be no night and no nighttime danger, so its gates will always remain open — representing the security of God's people in the light of his presence. The city will never house anything impure or any shameful or deceitful person; only "those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will be allowed inside, and God's people in eternal life will be completely pure.

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 " Keys to
 || Interpretation
 " - God with
 " people -
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|| **21:3 – God with his people**

|| Perhaps the most important point of chapter 21 is that in eternal life, God himself will be intimately present with his people. In the beginning, God walked in the garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve knew what God's footsteps there sounded like; God was with his people there (Genesis 3:8-10). When they sinned, though, they initiated an era during which God and people are separated by the corruption of human sin (as in Isaiah 59:2 — "your iniquities have separated you from your God"). Ever since then, God has desired to be reunited with his children, his creation. Scriptures like Ezekiel 37:23 and Matthew 23:37 and even Jesus' title

"Immanuel," "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), reflect God's desire to be close to his people again. (Notice the frequent refrain throughout Scripture, "They will be my people, and I will be their God": Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:33, 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20, 14:11, 34:30, 36:28, 37:23, 37:27; Zechariah 8:8; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10.)

This part of Revelation foretells that in eternal life, God will once again be with his people. God himself will live among people (verse 3); he will comfort them and take away all death, mourning, crying, and pain (verse 4); his people who overcome in life will be his children in eternity (verse 7); and the light of his presence will be like daylight that makes the Holy City shine (verses 11, 23).

THE CHOICE

21:6-8 – life or death

The promise given to God's people in this chapter is wonderful, but it is not given automatically. These verses indicate that each person must make a choice to "drink without cost from the spring of the water of life" (eternal life; see the coming notes on verse 1 of the next chapter). Those who drink this water and overcome the forces of evil that stand against the church in this life will inherit God's promises here in chapter 21, and God will take that person as his child. However, those who reject the "water of life" and persist in doing evil (as described in verse 8) will be thrown into "the fiery lake of burning sulfur," which is hell, the "second death." Particularly important in verse 8, in light of the church's persecution in the time of Revelation, is the Lord's warning to those who are cowardly — those who will not have the courage to hold to their faith in Jesus in the face of persecution and even death. The Lord's promise of eternal life is available to everyone, but each person must choose to receive it — and for the church in the time of Revelation, choosing to receive eternal life meant enduring persecution, even to the point of death if necessary, and resisting Roman society's pressure to give one's first allegiance to the emperor and the Roman state.

Discussion Points
 something to look
 forward to

chapter 21 — This part of John's vision was written to encourage the persecuted church in Revelation's time to stay true to God in order to receive a reward in eternity. This message encourages us, as well. What part of this chapter's description of the church glorified for eternal life do you find most inspirational? What do you most look forward to about the opening moments of eternal life? What does it mean to you to be a part of God's "Holy City, the New Jerusalem," and the bride of Christ today?