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Revelation #36

The Holy City: New Jerusalem
Revelation 21:9-27
Isaiah 60:1-5,11

Several years ago Ann and I, together with our two daughters, were driving back home from a short vacation in Estes Park, Colorado. I can't recall precisely where we were, but I think it was somewhere near the Colorado / Kansas border. We could see ahead of us that storm clouds were forming and sure enough it began to rain quite heavily. After the rain ended, we could see directly in front of us the most beautiful and majestic rainbow that we had ever seen. Now, I've seen a lot of rainbows, but I had never seen anything quite like this one.

Now, it's important for you to understand that scientists assure us that it is impossible to reach the end of a rainbow. There is no such thing as a pot of gold to be found there, not only because there is no pot of gold but because there is no "end" point of a rainbow. I read several articles this week on why it is impossible to stand under or drive through the base point of a rainbow, but I'm not sufficiently educated in such meteorological phenomena that I could explain it to you, or even to myself. Nevertheless, we were captivated by the beauty and size and brilliance of this particular rainbow.

What are you supposed to do when you are blessed with an experience like that? We didn't know what to do. So we simply held our breath and tried our best to enjoy the moment before it passed. I can tell you honestly what we didn't do. We didn't pause to break down the many colors of the rainbow into their constituent parts. We didn't scientifically analyze the rainbow or try to decipher its size or shape or anything else about its meteorological properties. To have done so would have been to rob us of the overall impact of the rainbow's existence. We simply drank it all in.

It was somewhat similar to what people mean when they speak of missing the forest for the trees. In other words, it's possible to focus so intently on the individual trees that one loses sight of the majesty and beauty of the forest itself. Or again, it would be like standing at the base of Niagara Falls and trying to calculate the quantity of water that is ceaselessly crashing down all around you. Or again, it would be like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and failing to appreciate its breath-taking grandeur because you are too busy trying to figure out how deep and wide it is and how it was actually formed.

I mention these things as a way of preparing you for your encounter with the holy city, the New Jerusalem. Now, make no mistake about it. I'm going to try to make sense of the many constituent parts of the New Jerusalem and of the glorious gemstones that comprise it. But I will do so in order that it might enhance the overall visceral impact that gazing upon this city is

designed to evoke. I don't want you to lose sight of the majesty of this city because you are overly obsessed with making sense of or interpreting its many individual parts.

I think perhaps the best way to experience the reality of the New Jerusalem is simply to stand back a bit and take it all in as a composite whole. When you do this, you realize that the reason John is shown this vision and the reason why he recorded it for us is to overwhelm our senses with the creativity of God himself. The purpose behind this portrayal of the city is not so that you might decipher the specific dimensions or overly analyze what each constituent part might mean. Rather I want you to feel the collective force of its beauty and the dazzling brilliance of what God has created. I want you to emerge from our study of the New Jerusalem with the same sort of feeling that I had as we gazed on that rainbow on our journey home from Colorado.

So, once again, my point is this: don't let your infatuation with the many trees blind you to the singular beauty and majesty and splendor of the forest itself. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will captivate your attention and mesmerize your imagination with the glory of who God is and his immeasurable creative power that is revealed in preparing for you and me this city that will be our home for eternity.

Some Introductory Observations

First, the description of the city in Revelation 21:9-22:5 is largely based on the vision of the temple and city in Ezekiel 40-48. What will become clear is that the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of the latter-day Temple is found in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. Many believe that Ezekiel's vision of the temple is to be literally fulfilled in an actual, physical structure to be constructed either during the so-called tribulation period or during the alleged millennial kingdom of Christ following his second coming. I think both of these notions are misguided. The vision given to Ezekiel is fulfilled in the new heaven and new earth and in particular in the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven to earth at the time of Christ's second coming.

Second, there is an obvious contrast between the vision of the harlot or the "great prostitute" in Revelation 17 and that of the bride here in Revelation 21. Note the similarity by which the two visions are introduced:

"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters,' . . . And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness" (17:1,3).

"Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain . . ." (Rev. 21:9-10).

Clearly John is being shown that the people of God are like a faithful bride, a holy and pure wife in relationship to God in obvious contrast with the unholy and idolatrous community of the unbelieving world. In other words, John is being shown how the entire world, in every age, is divisible into two contrasting parts. ***One is a harlot, a prostitute, an idolatrous and unfaithful woman who rebels against God. The other is a beautiful bride, a faithful wife who adores her husband and lives in perfect and unbroken intimacy with her bridegroom.*** It's also fascinating to observe that each of the two cities (Babylon and New Jerusalem) is pictured as adorned with much the same attire ("gold," "precious stones," "pearls,,"; see 17:4; 18:12,16; 21:18-21).

I should also mention the interpretation that these two contrasting pictures are actually of the same woman. The great prostitute of Revelation 17 is what the people of God were before they came to faith in Christ and were cleansed and beautified by the saving grace of God. The bride in Revelation 21 is the people of God now that they are redeemed and purified and cleansed of all stain of sin. It's an interesting thought, but I don't think that is what we are to understand.

Third, the question is often asked: ***Is this a literal city or a symbolic one?*** I take it to be symbolic, but symbolic of something very real. Note that the community of the redeemed, that is, the Bride of the Lamb (21:2,10) is equated with the detailed layout of the city in 21:11-22:5. When John is told that the angel will show him "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb," he is immediately shown the "holy city Jerusalem." It should also be pointed out that just as John was "***shown***" the great prostitute so also he is "***shown***" the beautiful Bride. We know the great prostitute was symbolic, so it makes sense for us to interpret the New Jerusalem as symbolic as well. Also, as we'll see in a moment, the dimensions of the city in 21:16-17, point to a symbolic interpretation.

I once had lunch with a man here in OKC who insisted that the New Jerusalem is physically literal. He actually constructed a picture of what it will look like and how much territory it will cover when superimposed on the land of Israel. As much as I respect his love for God's Word, that is not what John intended when he recorded for us this magnificent vision.

The Vision (vv. 9-10)

John's prophetic experience "in the Spirit" is a clear allusion to Ezekiel's experience (see Ezek. 2:2; 3:12,14,24; 11:1; 43:5). This obvious verbal connection between their respective experiences may also confirm the earlier suggestion that John's vision of the New Jerusalem is the prophetic fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of the future temple in chapters 40-48 of his book.

Most important of all is that John is clearly told that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, is in fact a beautiful picture of the people of God. Back in Revelation 21:2 John saw the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (v. 2). Then again, here in vv. 9-10, when John is told that he will be shown "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb," he is carried away by the Holy Spirit and shown "the holy city, Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" (v. 10)! In other words, the city symbolizes the saints, the people of

God. *We don't simply live in the new Jerusalem. We are the new Jerusalem. This city is the Church, the Bride of Christ, adorned in the beauty and loveliness that she has received by grace from God.*

This may seem to stretch the limits of what you can believe, so bear with me. Think of the church today, with all its warts and splits and flaws and controversies. Yet here in Revelation 21-22 we are shown *the church in its eschatological beauty as the Bride of the Lamb*, adorned with every imaginable precious jewel and bathed in the glory of God! It's a good reminder to us all that as often as we may be tempted to bail out on church, thinking it beyond hope and repair, God has a plan for it that exceeds our wildest imagination, a plan to glorify and redeem and clothe this rag-tag gathering of believing men and women in heavenly splendor.

The Architecture (vv. 11-21)

We will examine each element in turn. But remember that the purpose here is not to stir up a focus on the individual pieces of the city but to construct an overall vision that stirs the imagination and awakens our emotions.

The city or Bride of the Lamb is said to have *"the glory of God"* (v. 11). In the OT the physical temple was the place where God's glory resided and was manifest. But in the new creation God's presence (i.e., his glory) will abide in and with his people: they (we) are the holy city in which he dwells. Of course, this "glory" already lives inside every Christian in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself made this clear in John 17:22 when he said, "The glory that you [the Father] have given me [the Son] I have given to them" (see also 2 Cor. 3:18). That glory has now reached its consummate expression in the new earth and in the New Jerusalem.

On the *"jasper"* stone, see Revelation 4:3, where it likewise is used to describe the appearance of God's being. Jasper "is an opaque quartz mineral and occurs in various colors, commonly red, brown, green, and yellow, rarely blue and black, and seldom white" (Johnson, 199).

The city had *"a great, high wall,"* a reference most likely to the inviolable and secure nature of that fellowship with God which characterizes those within the city (cf. Isa. 26:1; Ezek. 40:5-6). No enemy can ever hope to breach that wall or assault God's people ever again. Of course, by this time all God's enemies have been defeated and judged. But John's point is simply to make use of the most vivid image in the ancient world for safety and security, namely, that of a high wall surrounding a city. No intruders. No unwelcome guests. Eternal life that is free from any and all threats.

The wall had twelve gates with an angel stationed at or on each one (vv. 12-13). These angels are similar to those of the seven churches (Rev. 2-3; see also Isa. 62:6). On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The wall also has “twelve foundation” stones on which were written the names of the twelve apostles (v. 14). The number 24, the sum of the 12 tribes and 12 apostles, has already occurred in Revelation 4:4. Some point to David’s organization of the temple servants into 24 orders of priests (1 Chron. 24:3-19), 24 Levitical gatekeepers (26:17-19), and 24 orders of Levites (25:6-31).

I agree with Beale that “the integration of the apostles together with the tribes of Israel as part of the city-temple’s structure prophesied in Ezekiel 40-48 confirms further . . . that the multiracial Christian church will be the redeemed group who, together with Christ, will fulfill Ezekiel’s prophecy of the future temple and city” (1070). Thus, here again we see an emphasis on the ***one people of God***, comprised of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, who together equally inherit the promises. Again, ***the New Jerusalem symbolizes the unity of God’s people from every age: both believing Israel and the Church together as one covenant people!***

The image of an angel measuring the city-temple is drawn from Ezekiel 40:3-5. The measuring itself portrays ***the security of the inhabitants***. “This cordoning off of the city guarantees protection for God’s end-time community and especially guarantees that its walls will provide eternal protection, in contrast to old Jerusalem’s walls, which were broken through by God’s enemies” (Beale, 1072). See also Revelation 11:2, although there the protection was only spiritual as God’s prophetic witnesses were subjected to physical persecution. ***Now, in the consummated temple, God’s people are protected in every way, spiritually as well as physically.***

Although the city is initially said to be laid out as a square with its length and width being equal, John indicates that it is also a ***cube*** (“its length and width and height are equal”; v. 16). Each side is said to be 12,000 stadia. A *stadion* = @ 607 feet. Hence, 12,000 stadia = @ 1,500 miles. “A city this size would occupy the entire Mediterranean world from Jerusalem to Spain” (Phillips, 644). You may recall that the Holy of Holies inside the tabernacle was a perfect cube as well (1 Kings 6:20). I believe John is telling us that ***the New Jerusalem is itself the Holy of Holies of God’s abiding presence for eternity! Ultimately, then, the eternal Holy of Holies isn’t a place but a people in whom God dwells and manifests his glory!***

The wall of the city (v. 17) is ***144 cubits*** (cf. 7:4-9; 14:1,3), i.e., seventy-two yards (216 feet). There is obvious symbolism in this number, as ***the 12 tribes of Israel are multiplied by the 12 apostles of the Church = 144, pointing to the fundamental unity of all God’s people***. This fact points again to the symbolic nature of the city, for a wall of only 216 feet would be terribly out of proportion for a city that is 1,500 miles high. Some have argued that the 216 feet is the wall’s thickness not its height. But again, 216 feet is only a fraction of the width needed for the base of a wall that surrounds a city nearly 8,000,000 feet in height!

Anyone who would try to envision the literal appearance of the city according to the human measurements given by John would be understandably confused. That is why John immediately adds that this vision is to be understood more deeply according to its ***angelic***, which is to say its symbolic or heavenly meaning (v. 17).

We are told in Revelation 13:18 that the number of the beast, 666, “is the number of a man.” Here in 21:17 we are told that the angel who showed John the new Jerusalem measured its wall: “144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement” (v. 17b). Thus we see a contrast between 666, the number of the beast, and 144 the number/measure of an angel. Interestingly, just as 666 is the numerical value of the Greek word “beast” (*therion*) written in Hebrew letters, so 144 is the numerical value of the Greek word “angel” (*angelos*) written in Hebrew letters!

The material of the wall was “jasper” (cf. 4:3) and the city itself was **“pure gold, like clear glass”** (v. 18). If literal, how could gold be like glass? No matter how devoid of alloy and impurities, gold is still opaque, unlike glass which is transparent. But the problem only exists if one insists on a literal city. John is deliberately straining the limits of human imagination in his portrayal of the beauty and majesty of the city.

The foundation stones of the city wall are now enumerated. The list of 12 jewels is very similar to and probably based on the list in Exodus 28:17-20 and 39:8-14 of the stones on the high priest’s breastplate. ***Note well that the jewels which in the OT represented the tribes of Israel are now applied not to the gates of the city, i.e., the twelve tribes, but to the foundation stones, i.e., the apostles of the church! And we must never forget that in 1 Peter 2:5 the church of Jesus Christ is described as “living stones” that “are being built up as a spiritual house.”***

The jewels and gems that comprise the material of the city are not designed to evoke thoughts of wealth, as if to suggest that money will be in endless supply in heaven. Rather, they point to the transcendent beauty and splendor and holiness of God’s character as now revealed in his people.

That we are dealing with prophetic symbolism (and hyperbole) here is evident from v. 21 where each gate is said to be **“a single pearl”**. How could there be a single pearl big enough that it would constitute a gate proportional to a wall that is 216 feet high? And how big must the oyster have been from which such pearls were derived? If one should respond by saying that God is certainly capable of creating an oyster that could produce such pearls, then one must acknowledge that he/she has departed significantly from what would legitimately be called “literal” hermeneutics.

Finally, the words **“the street of the city”**, found here in v. 21, occur elsewhere in Revelation only in 11:8 where it is said that the bodies of God’s prophetic witnesses were laid while the world looked on in contempt and derision. The phrase is repeated here to underscore that “the street of their former shame has now been replaced by the street of their eternal glory” (Wall, 254-55).

The Temple: the Lord God and the Lamb (v. 22)

When it says that John saw no temple it means no *physical* temple, no *literal building* such as existed during the time of the OT. There *is* a temple in the new heavens and new earth: God and the Lamb are themselves the temple! If this imagery is odd, recall that we have already seen the identification of the New Jerusalem with the bride of Christ.

It is actually quite stunning, and instructive, to consider that John applies the prophecy of Ezekiel 40-48, in which the physical temple figures prominently, to the eschatological New Jerusalem in which there is *no* physical temple!

The Luminaries: the Glory of God (v. 23)

Does this verse mean that there will literally be no sun or moon in the new cosmos? Perhaps. But it may also simply mean “that God’s glory is incomparable in relation to any source of light of either the old or the new creation” (Beale, 1093). If you were to light a candle in a dark room it would shine brightly. But if you were then to take that candle outside on a cloudless day, the brilliance of the sun would be so much greater that the light of the candle would be reduced to virtually nothing. So John’s point may be that even if there were sun and moon in the new heaven and new earth, in comparison with the blinding brilliance of God’s glory these luminaries would hardly even be noticed!

The presence of “light” in the New Jerusalem is just as likely a reference to *enlightenment*, that is to say, it points to the illumination of our minds and hearts to see and enjoy the splendor of God and his glory. We will understand then in a way that now we can only partially grasp. We will no longer struggle in darkness, wondering about what it all means, frustrated by our lack of insight and wisdom. No, then, in the new earth, we will see clearly and completely and never be in doubt as to the nature and truth of who God is and what Christ has done.

But how will we not be utterly consumed and vaporized by the full revelation of God’s dazzling glory and brightness? You may remember that when Moses asked to see God’s glory, he had to be placed in the cleft of the rock. We read of this in Exodus 33:18-23,

“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The LORD.” And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.’ And the LORD said, ‘Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.’”

Yet here in Revelation 21 we are immersed in God’s glory, surrounded by it, inundated by it, beholding the fullness of it and yet we live! In fact, in Revelation 22:4 it says that we “will see his face”! How can this be? It can only be because whereas Moses was still in his unglorified and

perishable body with lingering sin and corruption, such as is true of all of us now, when the New Jerusalem comes we will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself. We will stand before God fully forgiven, cleansed, justified, and altogether glorified in our resurrection bodies.

This, then, is the consummate fulfillment of Isaiah 60:19-20 – “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.”

The Residents (vv. 24-27)

These verses are a direct allusion to Isaiah 60:1-11. It would appear that ***John interprets the pilgrimage of the nations to latter-day Jerusalem in Isaiah’s prophecy as being fulfilled in the future, New Jerusalem, of the eternal state, on the new earth.*** There are several points to note.

The “nations” and “kings of the earth” (v. 24) probably refers to those formerly rebellious but subsequently redeemed from among the nations who will submit to God, praise him, and so become unified with the redeemed of all ages (e.g., Isa. 11:6-12; 60:11). These “nations” remind us of the promise in Revelation 5:9-10 that Christ has redeemed people from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (see also Rev. 7:9; Micah 4:1-2).

But what is the “glory” that the nations bring into the city? In Isaiah it appears to refer to material wealth and resources. But here in Revelation it is the praise and worship and service of the people themselves. It is interesting to note that the only other occurrences in Revelation of the phrase “glory and honor” are found in 4:9,11 and 5:12 where it refers to the praise of God and the Lamb.

The absence of “night” (v. 25b) points to the unhindered access to God’s glorious presence as well as the fact that there will be no darkness to dim the brilliance of God’s glory. Indeed, as Revelation 22:5 indicates, the absence of darkness is due to the continual illumination that God himself provides:

“And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

One final glorious truth about the New Jerusalem, God’s people, is that sin will find no place there. “Nothing unclean” will enter or be present there nor anyone who does anything that is “detestable or false” (v. 26).

Only those whose names “are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (v. 27b) will be granted entrance and there they will live and enjoy God forever and ever!

Some are tempted to ask: “Is my name written down in the Lamb’s book of life?” That is not a question that we are permitted to ask. The only relevant question is this: “Do you thirst for the living water that only Jesus Christ can supply? Do you desire him above all else? Is he the pre-eminent treasure and prize of your soul? Do you love him? Do you trust him? Have you invested your hope for eternity in his life, death, and resurrection? Do you believe that his death on the cross was for you, in your place, to endure the wrath of God that you deserved?”

If you can answer Yes to those questions, then I can assure you that your name is inscribed indelibly in the Lamb’s book of life. But if you answer No to those questions, why won’t you today, right now, instead answer Yes? There is nothing preventing you from doing so other than your own sin and selfishness and pride. So, repent! Embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior by faith alone!