

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study guide on Revelation 21-22 Week 12 (Sunday, November 22)

Background: In Isaiah 65:17-18 the prophet, speaking for God, wrote: “For *I am about to create new heavens and a new earth*; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for *I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight*” (emphasis mine, Mark Black). John declares in Revelation 21-22 that what Isaiah prophesied will soon become a reality. The day of fulfillment is being realized.

Text: We have finally arrived at a passage in Revelation that is not primarily about Rome and emperor worship and the persecution of Christians. Rome, her supporters, and the devil have been defeated. It is time for the kingdom to be established in all its fullness. What do these final chapters of Revelation tell us about it?

John envisions a new kind of existence, not just of humans but also of the cosmos. Most importantly, John writes that God will dwell with his people and that there will be no more sorrow, pain, or death (Revelation 21:3-4). All evil has been taken away, since there is no more sea (the realm of evil—see 13:1). The new Jerusalem descends from the new heaven to the new earth, perhaps suggesting that heaven and earth have become one. At the very least, heaven and earth are connected in a way they have not been before. Of course, God, being holy, can only dwell among people who have been purified, not the cowardly, unbelieving, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, etc. (21:8).

When an angel transports John to a high mountain, he gets a better view of the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb (21:9-21). It is not only beautiful, made of precious stones, but its physical structures and dimensions show it to be the true people of God. It has 12 gates, angels, and foundations, and its wall dimensions are multiples of 12, all symbolic of the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles. God and the Lamb are its temple and its light, and the nations who want to worship are welcome there (21:22-27).

Chapter 22:1-5 alters the metaphor a bit, introducing elements from the Garden of Eden. The river of life and the tree of life flow and bear fruit to give life to the people. The curse of the Fall has been removed, and as in Eden, God lives in fellowship with His people. Finally, 22:6-21 contain John’s closing words. He reminds the reader that these words are trustworthy (6-7), that only God and the Lamb are worthy of worship (8-9), and that this scroll should not be sealed since the time it concerns is already near. God’s people need these words to encourage them to be faithful. Jesus announces that he is coming soon and that all those who have remained faithful will receive their reward (22:12-14). After a last warning to any who would change any of the teachings of this revelation (something easily done by ancient copyists), John prays for Jesus to come soon (22:18-21).

Appendix: The New Earth

Christians most often talk about going to heaven when we die, an idea that is rarely if ever expressed in the Bible. We probably get our understanding of heaven from our songs and hymns more than from the Bible. Many Christians think that our souls will leave our bodies at death and that we will then live a bodiless existence with God in heaven for eternity. (The question here is not about the intermediate state between death and the resurrection. That is another [difficult] topic.) The question is, What happens after the resurrection of Christians? What is the biblical view?

It is important to realize that throughout the Bible God’s creation is always seen as a good thing. After God created the world, including human beings (in bodies), he said that it was good. The idea of God someday destroying his good creation should probably make us think twice. After talking about the resurrection of the body (not the immortality of the soul), Paul writes in Romans 8:21 that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay . . .” In other words, even the earth will be “resurrected.”

Someone will rightly ask, But doesn't the Bible say that the earth will be burned up or destroyed (Matt 5:18 and 2 Peter 3:10-13)? It does, but those passages mention the heavens being destroyed, too. Perhaps therefore we should see the burning of the earth as one that destroys evil, a purifying fire rather than one that completely consumes.

The Book of Revelation says a great deal about heaven; but as we have seen, it can be difficult to interpret. We should notice that heaven is the dwelling place of God, not human beings. In Revelation even the martyrs, the only humans in heaven, are apparently not in their resurrected bodies. Christians have often taken what Revelation says about heaven too literally. Some actually expect pearly gates, golden streets, endless worship, human souls separated from their bodies, strange creatures, etc. Since the afterlife is described in Revelation 21-22 as the new Jerusalem descending to earth, perhaps we should think in terms of continuity and discontinuity with our present existence. Perhaps we will have bodies and live on earth, but they will be transformed bodies living on a transformed earth, an earth that has been joined with heaven and in which God lives among us. Whether or not this is correct, it is most important that we believe in an eternal resurrection existence, without evil and pain, and in fellowship with God.

Discussion Questions

1. How important is the idea of a blissful afterlife for Christians? Do we have faith and do what is right "in order to spend eternity with God," or are other motivations just as important, or more so?
2. How does the idea of a future without sorrow, pain, sin, and death sound to you? Does the answer to this question partially depend on your age? How do you think this future sounded to John's original readers?
3. What do you think are some reasons John used "the new Jerusalem" as his primary picture of the Christian afterlife? Why do you think John used the Garden of Eden as another important image for the afterlife?
4. We often talk about the positive value of suffering. Yet God promises in 21:3-4 to remove sorrow and pain. How do you reconcile these thoughts, and what does this say about God's ultimate desire for humans?
5. John envisions eternal life as a new existence on a new earth, not an ethereal existence in the clouds. Are there positive things to learn about eternal life from this picture, or should we perhaps take this as simply another symbolic image in Revelation? Does it matter how we view eternal existence?
6. This is a difficult question which you may or may not want to discuss in your small group. John writes in chapter 22 about the things that must soon take place, and he says that Jesus is coming soon (verses 6, 7, 12, 20). Did Jesus come soon (perhaps in judgment on Rome), or does "soon" mean "at any time" (since no one knows the time), or has God's timetable perhaps changed? How do you interpret these verses?