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Revelation 21:9–22:5

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CITY OF GOLD: A VISION OF GLORY

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

What is heaven like? Is there more to heaven than just sitting on a cloud strumming a harp? We have a problem trying to envisage heaven. Despite the claims of some people to have had out-of-body experiences, no mere mortal has really visited heaven and come back to tell us about it. Though heaven is outside our experience, God has given his servants occasional visions into heaven: Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, and New Testament prophets such as John. Their visions into heaven usually left them flat on their faces, not writing books.

What do we mean by heaven? Heaven is the realm where God is fully present and where his will is perfectly done. Heaven is a realm that exists today, and has always existed. Periodically John sees heaven opened. Each time, he sees that the central feature of heaven is a throne, and one seated upon it. Around the throne are gathered circles of worshipers, praising God for who he is and what he does. Also on the throne, receiving worship, is the Lamb. There God is fully present and his will perfectly done. But that is there and we are here.

We can perhaps imagine a heavenly realm removed from earth, where God's will is done; and we can pray that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. But what would it actually look like if God's will were perfectly done on earth? What would an earth purged of all evil look like? At the end of Revelation, John is given a vision of just that: a new heaven and a new earth in which God has made all things new. We might call this the heaven of the future. This, too, is completely outside our experience and access. John is given a vision which pulls together all the strands of the Biblical narrative. We are given a most satisfying ending to the Bible, one that makes sense of everything from the beginning of Genesis onwards. But we will not understand this vision unless we're familiar with the Biblical narrative to which this forms the fitting climax. The elements of John's vision, the furniture of heaven, as it were, are drawn widely from the Old Testament, which has served all along as his database of images. Using these Old Testament images John gives us in these last two chapters of the Bible a vision of glory.

In our tour through the art gallery of Revelation we have arrived at the final room. It is helpful to think of the final six chapters of the book as three rooms which together form a separate wing of the gallery. The first and third rooms are complementary: the one shows the destruction of Babylon, the earthly city; the other shows the arrival of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city. In between is a room showing how God's deals with evil: after purging all evil from the earth he makes all things new. The final painting of that room showed all things made new: John *saw* the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, and he *heard* the declaration, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That painting, which we looked at last week, serves both as the final painting of its room, showing that God's final answer to evil is to make all

things new, and as the doorway into the next room. In this room John is given a much fuller vision of the new Jerusalem. To this we now turn—the new Jerusalem, a vision of glory.

Come and See (21:9-10)

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (NIV)

In chapter 17, one of these seven angels had invited John, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute" (17:1). The angel then carried him away in the Spirit into a desert, where he saw the woman, Babylon. Now at the end of the book John is given a vision of another woman, to counterbalance that earlier one. Again one of the same seven angels invites John, "Come, I will show you," but the woman he will now be shown is a bride not a prostitute. Again he is carried away in the Spirit, this time to a high mountain.

Revelation, and indeed the whole Bible, is a tale of two cities: the earthly city and the heavenly city, the great city and the holy city, the prostitute and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem. The great city is built by human hands, by those living outside the presence of God. The holy city is built by God so that his people can live in his presence. Babylon, the earthly city, has fallen so that the heavenly city can descend. We're given this vision to challenge us as to which is our city. If our vision is of the heavenly city we can live here in the midst of Babylon without being seduced by its intoxicating wares.

The New Jerusalem (21:11-21)

It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the elev-

enth jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

To understand this vision you have to understand the first Jerusalem. Today you can take a tour of Jerusalem or a virtual one in Google Earth, or look at picture books, but none of this will help you understand the new Jerusalem. What you need to know is not the physical geography of Jerusalem but its spiritual geography—the spiritual geography of a temple within a city.

Like any ancient city, this city has walls, gates and foundations. But the most important characteristic of this city is the one John describes first: the city “shone with the glory of God,” with a radiance like a precious jewel. The presence of God’s glory indicates that this is the temple, for that was where in the Old Testament the glory of the Lord took up residence. After the tabernacle was completed under Moses, “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34). When the temple was completed under Solomon, “the cloud filled the temple of the Lord... the glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kgs 8:10–11). It was the infilling with God’s glory that made the tabernacle and the temple what they were: the dwelling place of God. The glory of the Lord represented the Lord’s presence, but it was a concealed presence. His glory was visible as a cloud, even the thick darkness of a heavy cloud. God concealed himself in the cloud so that his radiance would not destroy his people. Yet even the presence of the cloud was overwhelming. When the cloud entered the tabernacle, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting” (Exod 40:35). When the cloud filled the temple, “the priests could not perform their service” (1 Kgs 8:11). When Isaiah “saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted,” the temple was filled with smoke and he found himself undone (Isa 6:1–5).

God’s glory took up residence at the heart of the tabernacle and later the temple in the Holy of Holies. Here it dwelt between the cherubim, above the atonement cover (the mercy seat), with the ark of the covenant as its footstool. This room, totally covered in gold, was God’s throne room on earth. But no one ever got to see the splendor of this room. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter this room, and he only once each year, on the Day of Atonement. When he went in, he was to burn incense so that the smoke of the incense would conceal the atonement cover, lest he die (Lev 16:13). This presence of the Lord, indwelling the temple in Jerusalem, came to be known as the Shekinah, meaning “indwelling.” Certain Christian circles today make much of the Shekinah glory of the Lord.

In the old Jerusalem the Lord’s presence was a concealed presence, but in the new Jerusalem it is no longer concealed. John sees that the city shone with the Lord’s glory. No longer is that glory concealed as in a cloud; now John sees God’s glory in its full radiance, radiance that he can compare only to a bright jewel. In the Old Testament the Lord’s presence was also a restricted presence, restricted to the small room that was the Holy of Holies. But in the new Jerusalem it is no longer so restricted: it fills the city. The boundary between temple and city has vanished.

The temple, and specifically the Holy of Holies, was the dwelling place of God. The surrounding city was the dwelling place of God’s people. The principle is God living in the midst of his people in fulfillment of his repeated purpose statement: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

The city has a high wall, gates and foundations. An ancient city, by definition, had a wall for defensive purposes; each night the gates

were closed and barred. But the gates of this city need never be shut (21:25), for there is no more evil. The wall has twelve gateways, inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The wall has twelve foundations, inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The number twelve indicates the people of God, for Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God’s people. The twelve Old Testament tribes are numbered together with the twelve New Testament apostles. There is only one people of God, the people whom God began to call together in Abraham. In the Old Testament this people was primarily ethnic Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham. There were occasional Gentiles who joined themselves to Israel through faith in Israel’s God, and there were Israelites who perished from Israel through lack of faith in God. Now in the New Testament age the people of God is made up of Jew and Gentile together, who share faith in what God has done through his Messiah. In either age the defining characteristic of God’s people is their faith in who God is and what he has done.

The twelve foundations of the wall are adorned with twelve precious stones. This is most likely a reference to the twelve precious stones which adorned the breastplate of the high priest in Old Testament Israel (Exod 28:15–21; 39:8–14). Each stone was engraved with the name of one of the tribes of Israel, so that symbolically the high priest carried the names of all Israel as he entered the Lord’s presence (Exod 28:29). Here, again, the imagery identifies the city as the residence of God’s people in God’s presence.

This identification of the new Jerusalem is further enhanced by the dimensions of the city. The city is 12,000 stadia on a side, and the walls are 144 cubits thick. Regrettably, the NASB, which claims to be a literal translation, renders these as 1500 miles and 72 yards. It is true that 12,000 stadia is about 1500 miles; and that 144 cubits is about 72 yards. Physically these are two pairs of identical dimensions, but symbolically they are far different. 1500 and 72 have no symbolic value, while 12,000 and 144 are richly symbolic, as is most every other number in this book. The meaning lies in the number not in the physical dimension. Twelve represents the people of God. The city has these dimensions because it is the city built by God for his people. The width of the walls expresses this perfectly: 12-squared. I take 1000 to represent a large number, so that 12,000 indicates that the city of God’s people is very large, yea infinite in size.

Furthermore, John sees the shape of the city. He specifically describes it as of equal length, width and height. It is true that this could describe a pyramid, but that would have no symbolic value here. We find the identification and meaning of this shape if we look to the Old Testament, John’s primary image bank. There is one other thing in Scripture that is specifically described as being of equal length, width and height: the Holy of Holies, first in the tabernacle (10 cubits per side), then in the temple (20 cubits). The Holy of Holies was the most holy place on earth, the place where God put his presence among his people. That the new Jerusalem is a cube indicates that it is the Holy of Holies; that it is 12,000 stadia on a side indicates that it fills all of creation and that God’s dwelling place and his people’s dwelling place have been conjoined. In the Old Testament God’s glory was concealed within the Holy of Holies, a small room at the center of the city. In the new heavens and the new earth God’s glory is clearly visible in the Holy of Holies, which now fills the entire city, which in turn fills the entire cosmos. Heaven and earth are joined together and all is holy.

A city that is 12,000 stadia in size, walls 144 cubits thick, 12 gates inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel, 12 angelic gate-

keepers, 12 foundations of 12 jewels inscribed with the names of the 12 apostles: this abundance of imagery indicates that this new Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God's people, where they live in his presence. That the city is a cube and God's glory fills the city indicates that the whole city is also the dwelling place of God. The dwelling places of God and his people have been brought together. This can only mean that heaven and earth are joined together.

What will this actually look like? I've no idea! But the last thing I expect will be a 1500-mile cube or pyramid descending upon the earth like a spaceship. I don't know what it will look like, but I do know what I'm looking for: to dwell in God's presence. The whole Bible has pointed to this, as God repeatedly said to his people, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was the declaration that this had finally happened (21:3) that elicited the proclamation from God, "It is done!" (21:7). Revelation is about the things which must happen. This is what must happen: God and his people must dwell together.

Glory (21:22-27)

The new Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God's people, but its most important feature is the radiance of God's glory. John now picks up this theme of glory:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

For the only time in this book, John tells us that he did not see something. What he did not see is very significant: he saw no temple in the city. Unlike the sea and the darkness, there was nothing wrong with the temple in the Old Testament. It was a very gracious gift of God to allow his people to build him a structure in which he would dwell in their midst. The temple concealed God's glory lest the people perish. The temple restricted the presence of God's glory, establishing zones of holiness in the surrounding world. The closer to the temple the more holy the space, and the fewer people could approach. But when all is holy, there is no longer a need for a temple. God's glory need no longer be concealed or restricted; his presence is universal, accessible and fully-visible. The whole cosmos has become the temple. City, temple and cosmos are all co-extensive.

When the radiance of God's glory fills the cosmos, even the brightest sun would be invisible. Such is his radiance that neither sun nor moon is necessary. Since the first creation, the sun and the moon have marked time. Within Israel they demarcated holy time from ordinary time. But when all is holy there is no longer any need for these heavenly time-pieces. Space and time as we currently understand them will cease to exist. Space and time limit and separate us. Despite advances in transportation and communications, we cannot be fully present across the barriers of space and time. When all space and all time is holy, God is fully present. And somehow we, too, will be fully present.

In this new realm, the universal glory of God serves as a beacon, drawing the nations and the kings of the earth to its light. Previously

in Revelation, these kings of the earth have been hostile to God. John sees them won over, bringing in their glory. At last recognizing a glory greater than theirs, they humbly bow down and come in. Their only qualification for entry is that their names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Paradise Regained (22:1-5)

The angel has shown John the new Jerusalem, the city-temple which fulfils all the Old Testament imagery of Israel, the imagery of the people God used as his agent of redemption. Now the angel shows John yet more ancient imagery, imagery that goes back to creation itself. He shows him the water of life and the tree of life in paradise regained.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The river flows from God himself, for it flows with life from him who is life. This river had flowed from the garden in Eden, God's first earthly sanctuary (Gen 2:10-14). Ezekiel saw the river flowing from a rebuilt temple, whence it brought life to the barren wilderness and the Dead Sea (Ezek 47). God, the author and sustainer of life, will give life to all in his realm. Here humanity will again have access to the tree of life, access it has been denied since expulsion from the garden of Eden. In this paradise there will be no cursed thing here, for all will be under God's blessing. The curses of Genesis 3 had reached their dead-end in Revelation 20. Now universal blessing resumes.

Here God's people will serve him. This is hard for us to envisage for we work in the age of painful toil, part of the curse God has inflicted upon the earth to ensure that the earth never provides us ultimate fulfilment. We think of work and service as negative. Our service will not be toilsome labor with head bowed, serving a harsh task-master. No, our service will be a high calling indeed. God created Adam to serve him: to be a vice-regent ruling over his creation, a vice-gerent administering his sanctuary by guarding and keeping. God called Israel to be his servant, again guarding and keeping. Within Israel he called the Levites to be his servants, again guarding and keeping. There is no higher honor in the Old Testament than to be called the servant of the Lord. He asked even his own Son to become a servant. It is to his servant that he says, "I will be his God and he will be my son." There is no contradiction in serving God and seeing his face. It is to his servants that he unveils his radiance.

Because God's radiance fills the cosmos-city-temple, his people shall see his face. To see the face of God is the destiny of everyone in this book. The recipients of his judgment try to hide from his face (6:16); it's the last thing they want to see. But for God's people, to see his face is their great reward. As C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.¹

A Vision of Glory

What will heaven actually be like? I don't know and I really have no way of knowing. What I do know is that God will be fully present in the radiance of his glory. The radiance of his glory is already visible in heaven now to the heavenly beings and to the saints who have already passed from this world. But a time is coming when that presence which is fully present in heaven will be fully manifest on earth as well. In that new world, God's glory will fill all, and we shall bask in the radiance of that glory which he shines upon us. One of the few people to have reflected on this is C. S. Lewis in his address, "The Weight of Glory." In opposition to those who say the most important thing is how we think about God, he writes,

How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important... It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can scarcely sustain. But so it is.²

And so we come to the end of the Biblical story. There is still an epilogue to this letter (22:6-21), but this is the end of John's visions of what must happen. These last two chapters round out the first two chapters of Genesis, just as the third last chapter rounded out the third chapter of Genesis. The story began, before Genesis 1:1, with God in eternal glory. The triune Godhead enjoyed perfect love and relationship. The Son shared glory with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). The story ends with God in eternal glory, but now shining that glory upon his people. His people bask in the radiance of his glory, enjoying the perfect love and relationship which he extends to them—not because he needs them, but because, as the self-giving God, he chose to create humanity for this purpose. All to the praise of his glorious grace.

We begin with God in eternal glory; we end with God and his people in eternal glory. At the center lies the cross where God revealed his glory through his Son. His Son on whom he periodically shone the radiance of his glory and proclaimed, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." His Son whom he welcomed back to heaven, "Well done good and faithful servant."

Did you notice the centrality of the Lamb in these verses? The Lamb is mentioned exactly seven times in this closing vision. The Lamb is so closely identified with God that the throne is the throne of God and the Lamb, and it is God and the Lamb who together are the temple of the new Jerusalem. I am forced in English to use a plural verb there, something that John would never do; so closely does he associate God and the Lamb that he never uses a plural verb for them.

Because of the work of his Son, God will welcome us into his presence, saying, "I will be his God and he will be my son" (21:7). He will shine the radiance of his glory upon us and say, "This is my son/daughter, whom I love; with him/her I am well pleased." To each of the conquerors he will say, "Well done good and faithful servant." What does it take to be a conqueror? We are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, in faithful witness, through death and into new life in the presence of God, there to bask in the radiance of his glory.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! ...now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.

2. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 34.