

## Is This Heaven?

I called this message, “Is this heaven?” The answer to that question, at least for some of you, will be “No, it’s Iowa.” (Field of Dreams). What is heaven? We use the word to refer to the sky above us and also to the biblical place of God’s realm and reign, a heavenly home we go to when we die. We have all kinds of thoughts and ideas about heaven. Mansions, streets of gold. Some talk of golf courses and fishing holes stocked with fish because that’s how we picture loved ones that have gone on. “I’ll bet they are...” We have our ideas, but what does John tell us about heaven in the Revelation? Keep in mind we are looking at Revelation from the pastoral perspective of John. What does this vision say to his congregation and to us? Look at Revelation 21:9. **“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. 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...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...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...” Revelation 21:9-23**

John sees a city come down out of heaven and from the description, the city is heaven. A New Jerusalem. “So heaven is a city? Shouldn’t heaven be a garden? I mean, we started out in the Garden of Eden so shouldn’t we end in one?” The image we get in chapter 22 of a river with orchards planted on each side makes us think more of a garden than a city and certainly more than the city of Jerusalem.

A garden, (not vegetable garden but think park), that's where we go when we want to stroll and think and meditate and rest and relax. Cities are noisy, crowded, unrelenting. You want to escape the city, yet John sees Heaven as a city, but notice he calls it the Holy City. It is a city that's been redeemed, sanctified, set apart to God. And it's not just any city, it's Jerusalem, a city with a history, a somewhat checkered history at that. Eugene Peterson writes, "...the city of Jerusalem – a cramped, thousand year old city, quite without splendor. True, there had been moments of great worship, great preaching, great temple-building, and great revelation here...this was the city that David captured from the pagan Jebusites and then dishonored with adultery and murder. This was the city that became infamous for its child sacrifices and unlawful sorceries. This was the city that mocked the saintly integrity of Jeremiah and turned a deaf ear to the powerful preaching of Isaiah. This was the city twice destroyed in judgment, first by the God-directed armies of Babylon, later by the Christ-prophesied Roman soldiers under Titus, and between the destructions only shabbily rebuilt by Nehemiah. When Jesus came to the city he wept; 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes' (Luke 19:41), and he lamented: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate' (Matt.23:37-38). Isn't this the most unlikely of cities to serve as a model for heaven? Yet here it is." But all of Jerusalem's history shows us God doesn't give up on the city or on us. He doesn't give up on his bride, even when the city has sinned, even when the bride (us, his church) has been unfaithful. He cleanses and forgives and restores and rebuilds and makes her once again a virgin bride, prepared and dressed beautifully for her husband! Peterson adds, "**Heaven is a holy city living in harmony with God; heaven is a virgin bride, alive in intimacy with God; and the city and bride are us.**" ...Eugene Peterson

In Peterson's fascinating book on Revelation, *Reversed Thunder*, he comments on John's description of heaven, this heavenly city, and mentions three rather visually striking things about it that I want to mention: Heaven is perfectly proportioned, light-filled and life producing.

**Heaven is perfectly proportioned.** What does that say to us? Peterson says, "We are being fashioned into holiness; holiness is perfectly proportioned wholeness." Wholeness and holiness and completeness are represented in the perfectly proportioned symmetry of heaven.

The vision shown to John includes measurements that remind us of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the instructions given to Moses. The tabernacle Moses was told to build was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and 15 feet high and the Holy of Holies, the sacred room where the ark of the covenant was placed, where the glory of God and his mercy was manifested, was a perfect cube, 15 by 15 by 15. John sees an angel measure the new city and finds it also to be a cube, like the holy of holies. Heaven itself is a holy sanctuary where the glory of God dwells. Instead of it being 15 feet, like the tabernacle holy of holies, heaven is 1500 miles, high and long and wide. Rather than 3,375 cubic feet, it is 3,375,000 cubic miles! Wow! Now, remember, it's a picture of holiness and wholeness. Peterson writes, **"The intended effect of these numbers on the imagination, though, is not to stagger us with size, but to give us a feel for the enormous wholeness, the vast holiness that reduces every desecration and blasphemy around us to puniness...Nothing is awkward. Balance, harmony, proportion prevail. Everything fits. Nothing is out of place."** ...Peterson That's heaven. The second feature we see is heaven is:

**Heaven is light-filled.** Creation begins with God saying, "Let there be light." The sun and moon were created to give light to the world. While they continue to give physical light, men and women have lost their way as sin brought spiritual darkness into the world. John says concerning Jesus in his gospel, **"In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it....The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."** John 1:4-5,9.

Jesus came as the light of the world giving light to every person who turns away from darkness and turns to him. In Revelation 1 John sees Jesus in his glory with his face shining like the sun and now at the end of Revelation, in that new city where God's glory is unlimited and unrestricted, John writes, **"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."** Revelation 21:23 Heaven means no more darkness, no more darkened thoughts, no more depression, anxiety, fear, sorrow or despair, no more overwhelming grief or burdens to bear. Heaven is filled with His light and his glory.

**Heaven is life-producing.** Life there is abundant. John writes, **"Then the angel showed me the river 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."** Revelation 22:1-2

A river of life! Fruit to nourish, leaves to heal. In John's gospel Jesus said the devil had come to kill, steal and destroy but he, Jesus had come that we might have life and have it to the full, in abundance. He has given us life, but as someone said, "we ain't seen nothing yet." Truly abundant life awaits us in heaven, life we can't even imagine. So much of life on this planet is dehumanizing but in heaven we will be the people he created us to be, growing and thriving as his new creation in his new heaven. One last striking feature of heaven:

**Twelve gates and twelve foundation stones.** In his vision John sees that the twelve gates had the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on them and the names of the twelve apostles were written on the twelve foundation stones. We don't have time to explore this today, but if you take time to read about those twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, they weren't exactly saints. Far from it. Peterson writes, **"The father of the twelve, Jacob/Israel, has little to commend him, and his seed did not improve in his sons. We have stories of brutality, fraud, violated and violent sex, cowardice. But in and through those life stories, God persistently brought about the salvation of wretches that didn't deserve to be saved, and revealed his glory."**

**...Eugene Peterson**

Then we have the twelve foundation stones with the names of the apostles. What we know of the twelve apostles doesn't necessarily fill us with pride in our spiritual ancestors. They were constantly arguing and bickering, trying to one up each other to see who could get closer to Jesus, struggling with their faith. We are familiar with Peter, James and John; Andrew, Philip, Thomas and Matthew are mentioned a couple of times, but the rest of the twelve, James the son of Alphaeus, Bartholomew, Thaddeaus, Simon and Matthias who replaced Judas Iscariot, we know nothing about them. And here's the deal, the foundation of heaven is built on folks like the apostles: messed up, doubting, obscure, unknown, but they came to Jesus and found salvation in his name. The entrance to heaven is through gates named after flawed, weak, messed up individuals like the twelve sons of Jacob, who didn't get it right all the time but they trusted in God's covenant and in his promises. It's good news for us! With those 24 foundational people and their stories before us, Peterson writes, **"There is nothing so evil in my unfaithfulness and nothing so obscure about my life that is not, even now, being fashioned into the foundation stones and entrance gates of heaven. When St. John saw the names of the twelve tribes inscribed in the gates of pearl, and the twelve apostles inscribed on the foundation stones,**

**he knew, and makes us know, that everything in history is retrievable...” ...Eugene Peterson**

The grace of Jesus is the foundation on which Heaven is built. Its gates open by grace. Heaven isn't closed to you because of your mistakes. Those twelve gates open to you through his mercy, his saving grace. When we see the names on the gates and on the foundation stones, we know it is by grace alone that we can make it. Only by grace are we saved. You don't want to miss heaven and you don't have to! Repent and turn to Jesus, make him Savior and Lord and then the heaven we talked about today will be your destiny. Perfect wholeness, made complete in him, a land of light where there is no darkness or despair, life in abundance, flourishing and growing, all provided by his saving grace. This is heaven and it's ahead for all who trust in Jesus. You don't want to miss it!

I want to thank you for joining us online. We have special missionary guests today that have been serving in a sensitive nation and so we can't air their testimony. If you would like to give to help support these missionaries, you can give online. They are worthy of your support. On line church, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.