

June has officially arrived and we have enjoyed a wonderful Spring that has felt a lot like Summer. Grouse Mountain looks more like a hiking trail than it does a ski hill. Elementary and High School is wrapping up in the next few weeks, and some of you are looking forward to the vacations, outings, and adventures you have been planning for months. What's amazing to me is how much time we can spend preparing for a two week vacation, and how little time we spend preparing for eternity.

Many people in Canada spend very little time thinking about what happens the moment after they take their last breath. Let me ask you, *what do you think happens on the other side of death?* To be sure there are those who believe that this life is all there is, that after our last breath we simply cease to exist. But throughout the history of the world, past and present, the number of people who hold to this view is minuscule compared to those who believe in some version of life after death.

Those who suggest that all religions essentially believe the same thing are uninformed; there are wildly competing ideas about who God is, who we are, and what the afterlife will look like. For example, Hindus believe that following death, the soul is reincarnated—transplanted, if you like, in another body—and left to work out the next stage of their destiny. Buddhists believe that after death, their soul—like a drop in the ocean—will merge with the universe.<sup>1</sup> The Christian vision is vastly different.

*What is heaven?* Christians tend to think about heaven as being a

future reality, far off and removed from this present one, but from God's perspective, heaven is a present reality. Heaven is God's dimension, it's the place where He dwells, the place where His Kingship is already universally embraced and celebrated.

Last September, we began our preaching series through the Book of Revelation, and as we come to the end of this book, all that remains is one final vision—a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. The world as we know it is out of sync with the world as God intended it to be. You don't have to be a Christian to know this is true; something in the human consciousness *knows* that things should be different. Why else do we rail against war, famine, and disease saying, "*This isn't fair!*", or, "*It's not supposed to be like this!*"

The longing for heaven—for a better time, place, and life—isn't a projection of the human psyche. There is a longing for heaven in the human heart—God put it there—and this longing won't be satisfied by any other thing. John's vision in Revelation 21 and 22 gives us a glimpse of what God is preparing. When the Last Battle has been won—with every foe vanquished and every barrier torn down—all that remains is the marriage of heaven and earth. When we get to the end—of the Book of Revelation, of history as we know it—what we discover is a new beginning for humanity, for the world, for the cosmos.

Over the next two weeks we're going to talk about heaven in terms of this new beginning. Please turn with me in your Bible to Revelation 21:1-14.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 7.

John writes, “Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

**5** He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ **6** He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. **7** Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. **8** But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.’

**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.’ **10** 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. **11** It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. **12** 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. **13** There were three gates on the

East, three on the North, three on the South and three on the West. **14** The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

By a show of hands, how many of you grew up in a small town? By comparison, how many of you grew up in a city?

What do people say about small towns? It’s a good place to raise kids, the pace of life is slower, people are friendlier—in a small town you really get to know people. Some would say that a small town doesn’t have all of the distractions or dangers of the big city.

What do people say about cities? Some would say that they are big, impersonal, and cold. Most people don’t know who you are, and how could they? There’s too many people to know, or, care about. Life moves fast in the city; there’s always something going on. People don’t slow down—the city never sleeps. But that’s part of what makes a city exciting; there’s lots to do. In the city, opportunities abound—jobs, relationships, education, and entertainment.

Take Lower Lonsdale for example—it’s rapidly expanding. New building are being built and people are moving in. You can find a good restaurant on nearly every corner, there’s craft beer, and Ernest Ice Cream. On Friday nights the city comes together at the Shipyards—Food Trucks, Market Stalls, and Live Music.

But often, when city-people fantasize about a different kind of life, they don’t dream about life in a different city, they imagine themselves on a beach, or at a mountain retreat—a place where they can rest, breathe air without smog, and hear themselves think.

Many religions that teach about an afterlife envision a garden-like paradise—a getting back to nature. What’s interesting is that the Bible’s opening scene features a Garden paradise, but it’s concluding scene features a heavenly city coming down to earth. *When you think about heaven, is this what comes to mind—a city coming down from heaven to earth?*

John is writing to seven churches located in seven cities in Asia Minor—*Revelation* is a letter to city-people. John knew that there is a gravitational pull in every city—to partake of its pleasures, to participate in public life, to protect its reputation, to advance its cause. That’s why it’s so hard to follow Christ in the city; there are so many dangers and distractions. Revelation 21 and 22 gives us an alternative vision; here we see a City we can call “home,” a city we can embrace wholeheartedly without compromising our loyalty to Jesus.

Let’s return to the question I asked earlier: *what is heaven?* This question that demands a nuanced answer because the vision John sees is multi-layered.

In vs. 1, John begins with a general statement, “*Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth’*”. But John then moves from the general to the particular saying, “*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.’*”

John’s vision describes heaven in terms of **Place**, **People**, and **Presence**.

1. First, let’s take a look at heaven in terms of **Place**. Heaven isn’t just any place, it’s described as being the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. And it’s really important that we pay attention to the adjectives.

The first thing to note is that it’s a **Holy** City. Generally speaking, when the word “holy” is applied to human beings, it doesn’t mean “perfect;” to be holy is to be set apart for God’s purposes. This City is the fulfillment of the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples—*your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. This City is the place where heaven and earth will exist in perfect harmony.

Imagine what it will be like to live in a city set apart for God, a city centred around, and sustained by, God. Can we even imagine a city without crime? The day is coming when door locks, car alarms, and security systems serve no purpose. The day is coming when we won’t feel fear if we hear footsteps approaching from behind. When the Holy City comes down from heaven, there might still be an East Hastings street, but it will be transformed. In the Holy City, there will be safe and affordable housing for everyone.

Think about our cities of North and West Vancouver—could we accurately describe them as being set apart for God? What about Calgary? Or Manilla? Or Cape Town? Or Hong Kong? If there is ever going to be a truly “holy” city, it’s going to have to come down to earth from heaven.

John also uses a second adjective; he describes the heavenly city as the “**New Jerusalem**”. He’s picking up on something that was spoken through the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 65:17-18 God said, “*See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will*

*not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.”*

The Jerusalem of today is at odds with the description I’ve just read—few would describe Jerusalem and its people as a delight and a joy. Present day Jerusalem is a city divided, a city rife with conflict, fear, hatred, and enmity. But in *Revelation’s* final vision, John saw a City descending from heaven, a City set apart for God’s purposes, and that’s what makes it the “New” Jerusalem—a City that has fully embraced the King of Heaven.

The New Jerusalem will be a city of worship, a city of justice, a city for the nations. The New Jerusalem won’t be built by human hands, it’s a city whose architect and builder is God<sup>2</sup>—a city we can call “home”.

2. John talks about heaven in terms of **Place**, but let’s move on to talk about heaven in terms of **People** and relationships. After describing heaven in terms of a holy city, John introduces another image—the city as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

**illus:** Yesterday, Naomi, Luke and I attended a wedding; the son of long time family friends was married. The groom, Nik, stood at the front of the sanctuary, waiting for the doors to open, announcing the arrival of the bride. When Taylor walked in, radiant, and beautifully dressed in white, we immediately stood to our feet. Why did we stand? Something holy was taking place, something worth of honour

and respect—the coming together of two people designed by God for one another.

In what way is the Heavenly City like a beautifully dressed bride? This familiar image communicates God’s longing for the closest possible relationship with His people. Isaiah 62:5 says, “*As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*”

This same image can be found all throughout the New Testament; the people of God, the church, is described as the Bride of Christ, and Jesus is described as the Groom. Revelation 19:7-8 says, “*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of [Jesus] the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.*” (*Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.*)”

Like Nik, at the front of the church, waiting for his bride, God is waiting for the moment when His people will be fully present and available to Him.

**illus:** Now I want to contrast this image—a groom and a bride, who only have eyes for each other—with another image. Have you ever tried having a conversation with someone while they are watching tv? It’s difficult, isn’t? There’s zero eye contact; they’re physically present, but not fully available. You can try asking a question and you might even receive an answer, but until the tv is turned off your

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:9-10.

connection will be limited. This analogy sums up our present relationship with God.

It's not that we don't love Him, it's that we're not fully present and available, and we won't be until He returns. Our fears, our obsessions, our addictions, our anger, our distractions, our hard heartedness, our sin—all of these contribute to the distance between us and God. There are certainly things for us to repent of and surrender to God, and these actions will deepen our relationship to Him, but when He returns all barriers will be gone. The only thing between us will be love.

Have you noticed that when the subject of heaven comes up, even in the Church, the conversation tends to focus around activity? People want to know, "*What will we do in heaven?*" No doubt you've heard golf fanatics suggest that heaven will be like an endless, perfectly manicured golf course. If you are a mountain bike enthusiast, you might imagine that heaven will be like Whistler Bike Park x a trillion.

Given that Western culture tends to value activity over relationship, it's not surprising that people speak of heaven in this way. We tend to get bored with our relationships and turn to activities that promise excitement, fulfillment, or joy. But in the end, true wealth is not measured in terms of accomplishments, activities, or net worth—true wealth is measured in terms of our relationships. I have yet to meet the person who, on their death bed, is clamouring to have their mountain bike brought just a little bit closer, or, who wants to hold their favourite cook book one last time. It's our relationships that give meaning to our activity.

Of course there will be things to do in heaven; heaven will not be like an endless church service. After all, the image God gives us is of a Heavenly City—there's always something happening in the city. But what will make heaven "heaven" is the depth of relationship we will enjoy with God and one another. No more distance and no more barriers—we will be fully present and available to the One who loves us with an everlasting love.

3. I've talked about heaven in terms of place and people, I want to briefly talk about heaven in terms of its chief characteristic, namely, **the Presence of God.**

As the heavenly city descended, John heard a voice from the throne saying, "*Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*"

Up until this point in *Revelation*, God's presence has been confined to the heavenly throne room. This does not mean that God is absent on the earth, but that there remains a separation between God's dimension and our own—all of that changes in John's final vision. When heaven comes down to earth; God's dimension and our dimension are finally, and fully, integrated.

Next week Pastor Paul will have a lot more to say about what life will look like when God dwells in our midst, but for now, I want to direct your attention to the description in vs. 4.

What is central to John's vision of heaven is the effect that God's presence brings about. "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*There will be no more death<sup>3</sup> or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*” Isn’t it incredible?! The day is coming when all human sorrow will be banished forever.

A life without tears means a life without pain, or loss, or opposition, or accusation; a life without blame, or shame, or guilt, or frustration; a life without disappointment, anger, betrayal, or rejection. In one sense, life as we know it will cease to exist—God will give us a new beginning.

Think about how exhausting it is to live life in the world as it is. In the Heavenly City we won’t have to self-protect or be suspicious. We won’t have to run, hide, or pretend. We won’t disappoint others and others won’t disappoint us; we won’t hurt others and others won’t hurt us. Think about what it will be like...the complete and total absence of fear...the complete and total presence of trust.

Can you imagine life without physical pain? Some of you have suffered with migraines for years; one day they will be gone. No more arthritis, no more bad knees, hips, backs, or ankles—everyone will be able to jump and run. No more clogged arteries, no more asthma, no more Alzheimers.

Can you imagine life without death? No more saying goodbye to grandparents, to best friends, to siblings, to parents, to children—**no more death!**

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<sup>3</sup> C.f. Isaiah 25:8.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship On The Edge*, 364.

What does God say? Vs. 5, “*I am making everything new!*” A new beginning; a new heaven and a new earth will be complimented by a renewed humanity. In vs. 6 God says, “*It is done!*” Whenever God speaks it is as good as done because He is “*the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.*” Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last—God had the first word in creation and He will have the last word in new creation. There will be a new beginning.

Revelation 21 speaks of both presence and absence; God will be present while tears, death, mourning, and pain will be absent. And there will be another significant absence in this Heavenly City—all of the character traits, behaviours, and people that stand opposed to God will be absent.<sup>4</sup>

Take a look at the list of those who will be absent, vs. 8—“*the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars.*”

Who are these people? Some scholars suggest that this list is shaped in such a way so as to include both those who from the beginning have rejected God, and, those who followed Jesus at one time but later abandoned Him when they experienced persecution. John begins with “the cowardly”—those who abandoned Jesus during persecution—and ends with “all liars”—those who found relief from persecution by joining the masses in declaring that “Caesar is Lord”.

No one enters heaven based on their own merit; John isn't suggesting that we need to clean ourselves up in order to earn our spot. No one can earn right standing before God; every person stands in need of grace and mercy. Salvation is God's gift, freely given, to all who turn to Jesus, and confess their need for forgiveness. And those who are, in the end, turned away from heaven are those who refused to turn to Jesus and receive His forgiveness.

The stakes are high; we are talking about life, your life, and where you will spend eternity—with God in the heavenly city or separated from God in place described as the lake of sulphur. Why choose separation and death when God offers life through Jesus? Turn to Him today.

**Conclusion:** Our text concludes with a description of this City of God—the walls, the gates, the foundations; next week Pastor Paul is going to speak to what some of these physical descriptions are meant to convey. As I conclude this morning, I want to highlight one last detail in our text.

In vs. 10, we read that when the Holy Spirit enabled John to see the City, it “*shone with the glory of God*”. While this description is applied to the Heavenly City, I can't help but wonder: *what would it look like for the glory of God to shine in our cities?*

In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*”

God's glory shines through the most unlikely places—our lives. God's glory is made manifest as we love our enemies and speak truth that many no longer want to hear. God's glory is on display when we stand for justice, when we demonstrate forgiveness and compassion, or offer healing in Jesus name. We are never more like God than when we engage in the work of reconciliation; as we do His work, His glory shines.

May the glory of God surround us, fill us, and shine through us.

### **Worship**

### **Benediction**