

## For the City: *The Garden City (Part 1)*

Revelation 21:1-22:5

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on February 16, 2014

### Introduction

- ❖ I hope you're ready. Because this morning we're going to the future. This morning you and I will be given a glimpse of the future. *How is that?* Because in 96 AD, on the prison island of Patmos, the Lord of lords and King of kings pulled back the curtain (that's what the word *revelation* actually means), and he gave the Apostle John a peek into the future.
  - ▶ John was given a revelation. The literal Greek is an *apocalypse*. This last book of the Bible is really the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ (1:1). I realize that sounds intimidating. When you think of an apocalypse your mind immediately goes to fire, war, and catastrophic destruction. You picture something bad, something scary.
    - But when first-century Christians read chapter 1:1, "*The apocalypse of Jesus Christ*", they would have pictured something inviting. The word simply means an unveiling, a lifting back of the curtain. John's letter is an unveiling of unseen realities, of future realities. And now we get a glimpse for ourselves.
  
- ❖ Now some may wonder why we'd spend so much of our time contemplating the future when there are so many present needs and problems around us. It makes future-talk seem irrelevant. There's the argument that some people are too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good. Or we could say they're too future-minded to be of any present good.
  - ▶ **But I'd argue that your capacity to affect any good in the present depends largely on your vision of the future, of *your* future.** I'd argue that the picture you have of your future – whether it's dismal or hopeful, bleak or promising – will give shape and direction to how you live in the present. Let me show you what I mean.
  
- ❖ Imagine two men convicted of the same crime and given the same sentence. Both are sent to a remote prison camp in the wastelands of Siberia, forced to suffer hard labor for 10 years. Now imagine right before they're shipped off. One man is told that his wife and child are dead. His only family, his most cherished relationships, are gone. Now the other man has a fiancé who sees him off and promises with all her heart that she'll wait for him. And then everyday she sends a letter to reaffirm her promise.
  - ▶ Guess what happened to them. The first man was found dead within a year. He simply wasted away. He had no hope, no future. Nothing to wait for. But the other man endured. He had a wedding to wait for and a bride waiting for him. He remained hopeful and walked out of that prison a free man ten years later.
  
- ❖ Same circumstances, same situation yet they experienced their present in such different ways because they had such different pictures of the future. *See what that means?* **It means your present is largely shaped by what you believe about your future.** That's why we focus on the future. There's a very present need to be future-minded.

### A Future City

- ❖ *So what's your picture of the future?* If you don't know, then look with me in this morning's passage. Because here we find a picture drawn by the very One who hold the future in His hands. *And what do we see?*

- ❖ Look at v1, "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*" **What I find so fascinating is that the Bible begins and ends with the heavens and the earth.** It ends just like it started. There's a unique parallel. The vision of the future we're given in Scripture is not about the *end* of creation. Rather like Genesis 1:1, it's about the *beginning* of creation – of a new creation.
  - ▶ At the end of this age, we don't see a reset. We don't see God starting all over with a new reality. Instead we see a renewal of *our* reality. Jesus says he's making all things new (v5) – not all new things. Which is why we shouldn't be surprised to see a city.
  
- ❖ Keep reading in v2, "*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*" So God's not doing away with the concept of cities. But there is a distinct newness to this particular city in v2. This city is not man-made. This one is not built from the ground up.
  - ▶ No, this one comes down out of heaven from God. This city is God's doing. This city is grace. And friends, if you're a follower of Jesus, this city is your future.
  
- ❖ We've been in a series for the past month called *For the City*. We've been talking about what it means for us to be not just a church in the city but a church for the city – a church that values its urban location and strategically equips its believers to engage the community God has placed around them for the sake of the gospel.
  - ▶ Now some have wondered, "*What does all this talk of being a church for the city mean for me since I live in the suburbs? Does this mean I have to move into the city to be faithful in my discipleship to Christ or to truly be a part of this church?*"
  
- ❖ No, that's not what we're saying. We're not saying you have to move into the city. **But we are saying that every Christian needs to be open to and anticipate one day living life in the big city.** Every believer needs to be *for*, and not against, city living.
  - ▶ Because the city is quite literally the future for us Christians. So if you can't stand city living, if you loathe the idea, then the new Jerusalem is going to be a pretty rough adjustment for you. If you're a Christian, your future will have a distinctly urban feel.
  
- ❖ But here's the thing: Everything you hate about the big city, everything that drew you out to the suburbs or makes you want to move there someday – whether the congestion or the crime, the pollution or the pressure to perform – all of it will be surprisingly absent. Creation will still be creation. The city will still be a city. But there will be a distinct newness to it all.
  
- ❖ I want to show you this newness as illustrated in our passage in two parts. **Today I want to focus on what's absent in this future city.** And next Sunday, we'll look at what's there.<sup>1</sup> *Why is this important?* If it's true that what you believe about the future shapes your how you live in the present, then what you believe about the city that is to come will shape how you live in the city that presently is. So let's look at seven things notably absent in this future city.

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<sup>1</sup> I borrowed these categories from my seminary professor Darrell Johnson. See his book *Discipleship on the Edge*, 358-68.

## No Sea

- ❖ The first thing we see *not* there in this new creation is the sea. Look back at v1, “*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and the sea was no more.*” Now don’t worry if you’re idea of heaven is laying on a beach. The point is *not* that there won’t be oceans on the new earth.
  - ▶ Remember the book of Revelation is chopped full of imagery and symbolism, which you’d expect in this kind of genre (apocalyptic literature). So people who try to interrupt everything in Revelation literally miss the symbolism and miss the point.
    - ***So what’s the point of saying there will be no sea on this new earth?*** To appreciate the significance, you have to understand that, among ancient cultures, the sea was often used in their stories to symbolize the forces of chaos that threaten our world. The sea was scary. It was the source of chaos.
  
- ❖ Well the biblical authors had no problem borrowing this kind of symbolism. So we read, in **Genesis 1:2**, that in the beginning the earth was without form and void and the Spirit of God was hovering over “*the face of the waters*” – over disorder. But then starting on day one, God begins to bring order and form to creation.
  - ▶ But in Genesis 3, with the Fall, forces of chaos are introduced that try to suck all of creation back into a void. Ancient people naturally associated these forces of chaos with the sea, with waves and flood waters.
    - So in Revelation we read in **chapter 13:1** of a beast (a representation of demonic powers) “*rising out of the sea*”. The sea is symbolically described as a hotbed of evil. Or we see in **chapter 17:1** the great prostitute, Babylon (a representation of the City of Man), “*seated on the many waters*”.
  
- ❖ *Do you see what the biblical authors were doing?* They used this kind of imagery and symbolism to communicate the LORD’s supreme power over all forces of chaos. And they did it in poetic fashion describing God, in places like Job 9 or Psalm 65, as One who tramples the waves of the sea or stills the roaring of the sea (cf. Job 9:8; Ps. 65:5-7).
  - ▶ **So when John says there’s no sea in this new creation, he means that all the forces in this world that threaten to undo the peace – the *shalom* of the earth and the personal *shalom* of our lives – will be finally and permanently removed from the picture.** God’s victory over chaos will be complete and absolute.
  
- ❖ But right now our world is threatened by the chaos of war, of terrorism, of nuclear destruction, of natural disasters. And personally, each of us goes through financial chaos, marital chaos, chaos in your work, in your studies, in your health, in your family.
  - ▶ But if your picture of the future is hopeful, if it has no sea in it, if there won’t be any chaos to threaten your peace, then imagine the kind of hope and resolve it offers you today when you’re facing seemingly insurmountable forces of chaos.
    - If you believe your God is sovereign over the sea, if you believe he’ll vanquish it once for all, then you can be sure no trouble in the present will overtake you. You won’t drown in the chaos *because* your God reigns over it.

## No Tears, Death, Mourning, Crying, or Pain

- ❖ The second thing we won't find in the new creation are tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain. Look at v4, *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”*
  - ▶ John calls them former things but right now they're present things. They're clear markers of our present world. **No matter how much we advance in medicine, in technology, in knowledge – our lives are still marked by tears, by grief, by death.**
- ❖ That's a present reality for every one of us. But that doesn't have to be our future. In the new city, there are no hospitals. For those of you in medicine, your job description is going to significantly change. In the new city, there are no funeral homes. No one will be selling coffins. Never again will you have to comfort a friend in mourning. There will be no death!
  - ▶ But until that day, everyone will die including believers. But Christians know that death is not our end. We know the sting of death, which is sin, has been removed by our Savior. So we need not fear death, yet we still have to face this last of enemies (1 Cor. 15:26). **But God has promised that death will be swallowed up in victory and thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). Death will be put to death.**
- ❖ Hundreds of years prior, Isaiah wrote of the same future, of a new heavens and a new earth. It was a future that he tried to describe to the greatest degree he could imagine. Listen to **Isaiah 65:20**, *“No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old.”*
  - ▶ What a future! In the present, we shed tears and mourn over children who die far too young, over friends and family we've lost over the years. In the present, we grieve the suffering of cancer and other joy-robbing, life-depriving diseases. Everyone living to one hundred? What a future! What a city to live in!
- ❖ But John says he's been given a much clearer, much sweeter vision. He says not just one hundred years, not just two hundred, or even a thousand. He says, *“death shall be no more.”* Friends, if that's your picture of the future, then it completely transform the way you respond to all the sources of sadness and sorrow in the present.
  - ▶ I had the honor of witnessing a brother in Christ die well of colon cancer. I was there with him in the doctor's office when the doctor told him there was nothing else they could do. And I was there at the funeral a few months later. There were plenty of tears on our part, but this brother died well, sustained by faith in a hopeful future in Christ.

## No Character Traits or Behaviors Inconsistent with the Kingdom of God

- ❖ The third thing to note in this city to come is the absence of character traits or behaviors inconsistent with the kingdom of God. See vv7-8, *“<sup>7</sup>The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. <sup>8</sup>But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”*

- ❖ Elsewhere in the New Testament we come across similar lists like this warning us that such character traits and behaviors won't be found in the kingdom of God (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5). And here at the end, it's clear that they meant business.
  - ▶ Now let's be clear: These verses aren't saying if you happen to do one of these things, you're disqualified from the kingdom, you're unforgivable. No, Jesus is far more merciful than that. We can be confident that anyone who turns from their sin in repentance and turns to Jesus in faith will be received and forgiven.
  
- ❖ **Notice this isn't a list of don'ts. Don't do this. Don't do that. No, this is a list of people whose lives are characterized in the end by these particular traits and behaviors.** These are people who refuse, to the end, to walk away from their sins and find their refuge, their hope in Christ. Such individuals are excluded from this new city, this holy city.
  - ▶ In v7 John says the heritage of heaven – of inheriting this city – is for those who conquer. Those who persevere in faith to the end. If you do, it says God will be your God, and you will be his son. That is, you'll be treated like his One and Only Son. You'll share in Jesus' status, in his righteousness. His heritage will be yours.
  
- ❖ So this passage stands as one last warning in Scripture to abide in Christ to the very end. If these people characterized by these traits and behaviors won't be found in the new Jerusalem, then you need to examine your own life to be sure that you don't fit the bill. Instead, may your life be characterized in the end as a life that lived and died in Christ.

## No Temple

- ❖ The fourth thing missing in this new Jerusalem is a temple. Skip on over to v22, "*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*" Now for a Jew like John, this would have been quite shocking. A first-century Jew would have a difficult time speaking of God's presence without reference to the temple. The temple was the very place you go to be in God's presence. That's where his *Shekinah* glory rested.
  - ▶ *So if God promised in v3 that in this city the dwelling place of God will be with man, then where's the temple? John's walking around and he can't find a temple. Why? Because the city is a temple. It's all temple!* No longer is God's presence limited to one particular location where only certain people have access. In the new city, God's presence is everywhere. Every resident has direct access.
  
- ❖ Notice the city's measurements. Look at v16, "*The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal.*" **So this city is equally long as it is wide as it is high. It's a perfect cube!**
  - ▶ Now the significance of that may not jump out at you immediately. But if you're a first-century Jew who grew up going to temple, who knows Scripture, then you know there's only one other piece of architecture in the Old Testament that's described as a perfect cube. It's the Holy of Holies (cf. 1 Kg. 6:20). The inner most sanctuary of the temple where the blazing, white-hot glory of God dwelt.

- ❖ The Israelites were forbidden to enter this holiest of rooms. Only the high priest entered and only once a year and only with the sacrifice of blood to cover his sin and the sins of the people. But no one else had such access to God's presence.
  - ▶ **But now John is saying that the whole city coming down from heaven is not just the temple – it's the Holy of Holies.** Every square inch of that city will be sacred. *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."* (v3)

### No Need for the Light of the Sun or Moon

- ❖ Fifth, in the new creation there will no longer be a need for the light of the sun or moon. Look at v23, *"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb."*
  - ▶ Notice it didn't say there will actually be no sun or moon. Just that we won't need them for light. *Why?* Because the *Shekinah* glory of God will dwell with us, the whole city will be bathed in his light thereby making the sun's light unnecessary.
- ❖ Again Isaiah saw something similar in his day. In **Isaiah 60:19** we read, *"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."* It's a beautiful vision.
  - ▶ But again John is granted greater insight. John can see the source of this illuminating glory. **He sees the lamp from which all this glorious light is shining, and he says it's a Lamb! Not just any lamb but the Lamb who was slain** (Rev. 5:6). The source of this city's light is the crucified Savior. This right here is the highest affirmation of Jesus' divinity. The Lamb is the lamp that will shine the glory of God throughout the new heaven and new earth for all of eternity!

### No Closed Gates

- ❖ The sixth thing that won't be there in the new Jerusalem are closed gates. We're told in v12 that the twelve gates of the city are named after Israel's twelve tribes. Look at how the city is described in v25, *"and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there."*
  - ▶ In ancient times, a city's gates were closed at night for fear of unwanted visitors or invaders. **But in the new Jerusalem there will never be a need to shut the gates. Because in the new Jerusalem, there will be no longer be a fear of outsiders, of foreign nations, of Gentiles.**
- ❖ Instead the twelve gates of the twelve tribes of Israel will be open forever. We're told in v24 that the nations and the kings of the earth will freely enter by those gates and bring their glory and honor to the Lamb.
  - ▶ This alludes back to **chapter 7:9** where John says, *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."*

- ❖ If this is a picture of the future, then it certainly ought to shape our present. If we're moving towards a city whose gates never close – a city that freely and openly receives any worshipper of the Lamb regardless of race, class, or background – then are we striving to reflect that in our churches to the highest degree possible in the present?
  - ▶ ***Do we have any closed gates in our church?*** Have we put up barriers, perhaps unintentionally, that keep certain kinds of people out, even those that sincerely want to worship the Risen Lamb with us?
  
- ❖ As an immigrant church, it's hard to say that we haven't. Let's be honest with ourselves, and let's let our future shape the way we live and do church in the present. If it'll require *us* to make some changes, *us* to give up our preferences, *us* to expand our tastes in worship style or ministry methodology, then let's do it with joy.
  - ▶ Do it for the mission of making disciples among the nations, starting with the diverse groups of neighbors in this surrounding community. **If we truly believe all the gates will be open in the future, then let's start opening them now.**

### **No Curse**

- ❖ The last thing I want you to see missing in the new creation is the curse of sin. Look over at chapter 22:3, "*No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.*"
  - ▶ If this is all that was said about the new heaven and new earth, it would be cause enough for celebration. Imagine the curse of sin being fully and finally removed! In Genesis 3, we're told that the sin of Man brought a curse upon this world (3:17).
  
- ❖ The ground was cursed making our work a burden rather than a joy. Wives began to suffer in childbirth, and their husbands began to dominate them rather than lead them. And instead of passing blessing back and forth, humans started passing blame. All of creation was subjected to bondage and frustration. It was cursed.
  - ▶ And what's worse, because of our inability to keep God's law we individually are under a curse. We are cursed with death, the first and second deaths (21:8).
  
- ❖ **That was the beginning of the Bible. But now here at the end, we see the curse lifted.** We see creation set free from bondage. We see the same for people too. We see all things being made new. We see the former things passing away.

### **Gone Because of Christ**

- ❖ Now you might have noticed this already, but it's worth mentioning as a conclusion. We just covered seven things that are missing in the new heaven and new earth, in the new Jerusalem. Seven things that you won't find. Seven things that are gone.
  - ▶ **Well there's an overarching reason why you won't find them in our future city. And that reason is Jesus. He is the one who ultimately takes each one away.**

- ❖ 1) Jesus is the one who takes away the **sea**. He tramples it. He walks all over it. He has the power to walk all over the forces of chaos, but for your sake, he let the waters overtake him when he died upon the cross. He died and rose again that you might have victory over chaos.
  - ▶ 2) The same could be said of **death** and all the **tears** and **grief** that accompany. Jesus is the one who defeated this last enemy. *Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?* Jesus removed it. He died and rose again for us so that even though we die, we won't stay dead. We too will rise and live eternally in a new creation.
  
- ❖ 3) Jesus is also the reason why no **persons characterized by the traits and behaviors** in v8 will be found in the new city. Either because they found forgiveness and new life in Christ their Savior or because they will find perfect justice in Christ their Judge.
  - ▶ 4) Jesus is also the reason why there is no **temple** in the new city. Because he's the true temple. He said if you destroy this temple, referring to his body, he'll raise it up again in three days. There's no temple because Jesus is where we now go to meet God.
  
- ❖ 5) Jesus is the reason why we don't need the **light of the sun**. We saw already how Jesus will be the all-glorious, all-sufficient lamp that will illuminate the entire new creation.
  - ▶ 6) Jesus is also why the **city gates** are never closed. It's because he suffered outside the city gates to secure us a city yet to come, a city where people from every tribe and tongue are free to come.
  
- ❖ 7) Jesus is the reason why the **curse** is gone. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). The price of lifting that curse was his own life sacrificed for us.
  - ▶ *What's your picture of the future?* If this is what you want, if you want the future described here in Revelation 21-22, then fly to Christ and receive his mercy.