

For the City: *The Garden City (Part 2)*

Revelation 21:1-22:5

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on February 23, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Imagine giving two men a mundane, tedious task of building widgets. You put them in identical rooms isolated from everyone else, and you tell them, “For 10 hours every day I want you to build me widgets. You screw this piece here. You turn that piece there. You click this piece into place, and you have a widget. Do that for 10 hours straight every day.”
 - ▶ So we have a two men in identical situations doing identical tasks. But you tell one guy, “After one year you’ll be paid an annual salary of \$20,000.” But to the other guy you say, “After one year you’ll be paid an annual salary of \$20,000,000.”

- ❖ *What do you think is going to happen?* After one, maybe two, months, the first guy is going to walk out of that room and say, “I can’t take it anymore. This is so not worth it. I quit!” But the second guy will be whistling while he works saying to himself, “This is great! I love this job!” *What happened?* Identical situations. Identical tasks. Their present realities were exactly the same. But their visions of the future were completely different.
 - ▶ We saw how this works last week. We saw how much influence our perception of the future has on our experience of the present. **We talked about how your present is largely shaped by what you imagine your future to hold.**
 - So I asked you then and I ask you again: *What is your picture of the future? What are you waiting for? What are you picturing?*

- ❖ Last week we began to study a picture drawn by the One who holds the future in His hands. We looked at Revelation 21-22. I explained how the word *revelation* simply means an unveiling, a pulling back of the curtain to reveal unseen realities, including future realities. *And what do we see?* We see a city. God’s future redeemed world is depicted as a city. Now is there any significance to that? Of course there is!
 - ▶ Think about it: **If your future life is a completely foreign reality, then its influence on your present living will be minimal.** It’s hard to prepare for a future you can hardly comprehend. If your picture of the future has you living on a cloud, or in another dimension, or on another planet – how is that going to give any shape to the way you live now? You have no experience, no idea what that kind of life will be like.
 - **But if you’re future is a city, if your future involves city living, then that’s something you and I can relate to.** You know what that’s like. As you learn more about this future city and what it’s like to live there, you can easily translate that into how you’re living in the present.

- ❖ Now I'm not surprised if some Christians are disappointed to hear that their future is a city. Some people don't like living in the city. There are too many buildings, too many cars, too much concrete. Their picture of heaven is a pastoral scene in the countryside with rolling fields of green and a lazy river running through it.
 - ▶ So if that's heaven for you, then I can see why a city is the last place you'd want to be living for all eternity. But friend, this is no ordinary city. This is what commentators have called a **garden-city**.

- ❖ Careful students of the Bible will notice, as they read through our passage, that there's something familiar about this new city that comes down from heaven. In chapter 22:1-3, we see a river flowing through the city center watering what's described as "*the tree of life*".
 - ▶ That immediately harkens us back to Genesis 2 where we read of a river watering the garden including the tree of life. **We suddenly realize this new Jerusalem is none other than the same Garden of Eden but now fully cultivated into a garden-city.**
 - So in a sense, there's something for everyone here. Whether you love living, working, and playing in the high density of the big city or you love driving past the city lights and limits to be one with nature – you're going to love it in this garden-city.

- ❖ *So what will life in this city be like?* Last week we answered that question by observing seven aspects of our present human experience that will be notably absent in this new creation. We talked about what's not there in the future. Today we'll round it out by considering what will be there. ***What's present in this garden-city to come?*** I have seven things to point out.¹

God is There

- ❖ First, notice with me a clearly obvious but hugely significant observation. In this garden-city to come, **God will be there.** Look at v3, "*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '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.'*"
 - ▶ That word "dwelling place" is the word for tabernacle. It brings to mind Israel's tabernacle, that singular place where God dwelt in the midst of his people. It was always erected in the middle of Israel's camp. All twelve tribes would set their tents around it. **The tabernacle represented the very presence of God, which is why it was so central to everything.**

- ❖ This is where so many **modern conceptions of heaven fall terribly short.** There are so many books about firsthand accounts of heaven, written by those who've had near-death experiences and claim to have journeyed to heaven. And what do they typically describe? A warm light? Feelings of peace and serenity? A reunion with loved ones? The absence of all the sorrow or suffering that plague them in this life?
 - ▶ *All of that is well and good, but sadly what's usually missing in these accounts? What is the central goal and enjoyment of heaven?*

- ❖ It's God – the immediate presence of God. Think of it like this. ***On her wedding day, what gives a bride her greatest joy?*** Is it all the pretty flowers and decorations? All her many guests who've arrived? The dress she picked out months ago that she can't wait to show off?
 - ▶ I'm sure all of these things bring her joy, but they're not what brings her the greatest. *What would that be?* Her man. Her groom. His presence. If she were to walk down that aisle and he's not there, nothing else will do. Her wedding would be a disaster.

¹ I borrowed these categories from my seminary professor Darrell Johnson. See his book *Discipleship on the Edge*, 369-79.

- ❖ Likewise, heaven would be a hell if you showed up and God wasn't there. He's the point. He's the reason. He's the goal. God is the chief delight of heaven. That's what he is. But friends, the question is: *Do you see it that way? Do you believe it?*
 - ▶ Honestly ask yourself: ***Would I still enjoy heaven if God wasn't there?*** If you could be in heaven and be free of sin, be reunited with loved ones, be living in a new world without injustice, without pain, without tears or sorrow, where no one starves, no one gets sick, no one is lonely, where we all live in perfect harmony with each other and with creation itself – but God was absent – would you still enjoy heaven? **If the thought of heaven without God is even remotely bearable, then it demonstrates that you have yet to fully grasp the superior value of God.**
- ❖ Being forgiven, avoiding hell, being reunited with relatives and friends are all precious gifts, but they're not nearly as valuable as the Giver. Getting God is the good news of the Gospel!
 - ▶ Friends, this is a good test to see if you're truly born again of the Spirit, if you're truly a Christian. **If the vision of being in God's immediate presence does nothing for you, if it doesn't stir you, if your heart isn't moved, then you have to wonder if your heart is new.** Because we know that all who have experienced the new birth have been given a new heart that longs to be with God and to enjoy him forever.

Glory is There

- ❖ The second thing we notice that's clearly present in this garden-city is glory. **Glory is there.** Look at vv10-11, *"¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."*
 - ▶ So John is describing this city as glowing, as radiating "like a most rare jewel". Later in vv18-21, he describes the city walls and foundations by just naming jewel after jewel after jewel. It's all he could do to describe this shining city!
- ❖ V23 says the city is so illuminated that there's no more need for the light of the sun or moon. Let's read it again, *"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."*
 - ▶ So John looks around the city trying to find the source of this luminous glory. He's looking for a lamp and discovers it's a lamb – *the* Lamb, the crucified and risen Lamb (cf. 5:6). **In other words, our Savior Christ Jesus will be the very source of glory radiating throughout the new creation.**
- ❖ We're talking about **the Shekinah glory**. That's the term in Old Testament theology for any manifestation of God's divine presence on earth. If you were in the Israelite camp in the days of Moses, you would've seen the *Shekinah* glory covering the tabernacle in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 40:34-38). Of if you lived in Solomon's day you would've seen the same cloud and fire filling the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kg. 8:10-11)

- ❖ In those days, the *Shekinah* glory was limited to the temple. But now it's shining everywhere, which is significant since John says he doesn't see a temple anywhere in the city. Look at v22, "*And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*" And we saw last week how the dimensions of the city walls (being perfectly equal in length, width, and height, v16) suggest that the city itself is being depicted as the Holy of Holies – that inner sanctuary of Solomon's temple where the *Shekinah* particularly dwelt.
 - ▶ *So why is there no temple in this new city?* Because on one hand, the city itself *is* the temple. But also because, as v22 makes clear, the temple *is* the Lord. "*For its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*" In the old creation, the LORD God dwelt in a temple. **In the new, the temple *is* the LORD God *and* the Lamb.**
- ❖ Think about it and it'll blow your mind. **The Triune God of the Universe *is* the temple which *is* the city.** By implication, that means God *is* the city! This is crazy! **This means for you and I to live *in* this future city is to live *in* God.**
 - ▶ Brothers and sisters, in heaven you don't just get to be *with* God. You get to be *in* God! The Apostle Paul said that *in* God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). That's true right now, in a sense. But one day, we'll experience the reality of being "in God" in every sense of the word. It'll be a perfect communion.

A Wedding is There

- ❖ This leads us to the third thing to notice in this garden-city. **Notice a wedding.** We see this in two places. First 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.*" And then again in v9 where an angel tells John that he'll show him, "*the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.*"
- ❖ So the context of this entire passage is a wedding ceremony. There's a Groom, which v9 says is the Lamb, the crucified and risen Christ. And there's a Bride, which v2 says is the city, the new Jerusalem that comes down from God.
 - ▶ ***Now wait, didn't you just say that God is the city? But now you're saying the Bride is the city?*** Which is it? Is God – the Lamb that was slain – is *he* the city? Or the Bride – the Church for whom he died – is *she* the city?
 - Answer: Yes. It's both. They're both the city because the two have become one. Remember, this is a wedding. And in every wedding there's a union where two become one.
- ❖ Every wedding ceremony you've ever attended (including your own) is just a shadow of *this* reality. Every union of a husband and wife is a pointer to this glorious day when God the Father walks the Bride of Christ down the aisle. *Did you see that in v2?* John says that God will bring the Church (all who are in Christ) down from heaven. On that day, we'll be beautifully adorned and ready to be wed.
 - ▶ Paul says in **Ephesians 5** that this is what every marriage is ultimately about. He says the mystery of marriage is this: It's about Christ and the Church (5:32). It's about this future wedding in this future city.

- ❖ Notice how, in Ephesians, Paul also emphasizes the future in order to shape how we live in the present. **He's bringing up this future marriage of Christ and the Church because he's trying to teach husbands and wives how to live and love in the present.**
 - ▶ Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her – now husbands are to do the same with their wives. Likewise, the Church willingly submits to Christ as head – now wives are to do the same with their husbands.

- ❖ Friends, if this Revelation 21 wedding is our future, if every present-day wedding ultimately exists to serve the significance of this coming day, then you can see how it's going to shape the way you either pursue marriage or live out your marriage in the present.
 - ▶ If marriage is ultimately about *this* – about proclaiming the glorious reality of this Revelation 21 union between Christ and his Church – then it changes things. ***If marriage is ultimately about God, then how could we dare make the idea of marriage or our marriage partner a god that we end up worshiping?***

- ❖ There's such a temptation to put the idea of getting married or to put our spouse in the place of God expecting marriage to satisfy us in ways only God can do. But if you believe this is your future, then it offers a vision for this life that puts marriage in a proper God-centered perspective. It gives a new shape for how you live in the present.

Nations are There

- ❖ The fourth thing to notice in this garden-city is that **the nations are there**. Look at v24. Remember, John just said the Lamb is the lamp that's radiating this *Shekinah* glory, and then in v24 he says, “²⁴*By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.*”

- ❖ Last week, we talked about how there are no closed gates in this city. There's no longer any fear of outsiders, fear of foreigners, fear of the nations. Rather we see them drawn towards the glory of the Lamb like a city on a hill, like a lamp on a stand (cf. Mt. 5:14-15).
 - ▶ **The nations (*ethne*) will enter this city.** And by *nations* we don't mean nation-states with political borders. We're talking about all the distinct people groups on the face of the earth throughout human history.

- ❖ John describes for us in chapter 7 this great multitude that no one can number from all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in our hands, worshipping Jesus in a loud voice (cf. 7:9-10).
 - ▶ **So in the new creation, no one ethnic group or culture is going to dominate the rest.** Because no one ethnic group or culture can bear the weight of God's glory or manifest his full image and likeness. It'll require an assembly of worshippers from all the diverse peoples of the earth.

- ❖ *Now how is a picture like that, of our future, going to shape our present, especially the present state of our churches?* You've probably heard the saying about how 11am Sunday morning is the most racially-segregated hour in America.
 - ▶ Some people might walk in here and accuse us of contributing to that. They'd say the Chinese Church is not allowing this picture of our future to shape its present practice. That we fail to reflect this future reality of the nations worshipping together.

- ❖ Now on one hand, this criticism is too simplistic. It glosses over the diversity that is found in a church like ours by only factoring in race. **Because though a good majority of us are ethnically the same, there is a lot of cultural diversity between us** – between 1st and 2nd generation Chinese or between Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Mainlanders. That we can worship together in harmony in spite of our differences is a tribute to the power of the Gospel – similar in effect had this room been filled equally with whites, blacks, hispanics, and asians. **Cultural divides are being bridged by the gospel even in a church like ours.**
 - ▶ This criticism also overlooks our church's unique missional strategy to contextualize the gospel in the heart language of the immigrant Chinese migrating into the city. So yes, there's an overwhelming majority of Chinese here – because we're trying to reach an overwhelming population of immigrant Chinese who don't know Jesus.

- ❖ But there is a valid criticism here. I don't think we should be criticized simply for the fact that we have so many Chinese in this church. **But we should be criticized if we're not doing everything we can to ensure that non-Chinese are welcomed to worship here and be discipled in the English congregation** – to be a church welcoming to all peoples while simultaneously giving the Chinese congregations freedom to focus on the immigrant lost.
 - ▶ If in the future city all the gates are opened so that nothing hinders the nations from entering to worship, then let's do what we can in the present to ensure that none of our cultural or stylistic preferences are hindering non-Chinese from worshipping the Lamb with us in this congregation. That's how the future ought to shape how we're doing church in the present.

Human Culture is There

- ❖ Related to this point is the fifth thing we see in the city and that's **human culture**. I see that represented in the mention of kings in v24. It says that the "*kings of the earth*" will bring their glory into the city.
 - ▶ It's important to understand that the kings of the earth represented more than just political authorities. **Kings were also representatives of their respective cultures.** Today, in our culture, that job is shared by many. Artists, entertainers, athletes, politicians, and professionals all function as representatives of a society's culture.
 - But in biblical times, that job was held primarily by the king. So to assemble the kings of the earth together, as here in v24, is to assemble together the cultures of the earth.

- ❖ **All of this suggests that, in the new creation, human civilization will persist.** That's different compared to most modern conceptions of heaven where it's seen as some otherworldly existence. Most people see heaven as some place in the sky. But the Christian's final hope has never been to go to heaven. No, the Christian's final hope has always been to live in a new city with a new heaven and a new earth.
 - ▶ In this new creation there will be tangible stuff. They'll be walls, gates, and streets. That means architects, engineers, and city planners will continue to design and build. Scientists and inventors will continue to advance knowledge and technology. Authors and composers will continue to write. Musicians and artists will continue to create. **In other words, culture-making will be an ongoing task in the new creation.**
- ❖ If this is our future, then it gives greater purpose and motivation to contribute to our city's culture through our own vocations, our own gifts and talents. All of our efforts to create and shape human culture won't be for naught. God doesn't plan to obliterate all cultures and civilizations in the end. No, he intends to renew it. To purify it from all the effects of the Fall.

Life is There

- ❖ The sixth thing we notice in this garden-city is **the clear presence of life**. See chapter 22:1-2, "*¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.*"
 - ▶ So in this garden-city is a river of life and a tree of life. The idea is that we'll be drinking and feeding on life. And this is not life like we know it now – life that deteriorates towards death. No, this is eternal life – life that never depletes.
- ❖ This life was made available to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Humanity used to eat from **the tree of life**. But we were barred from doing so any longer and cast out of the garden. *Why?* Because we ate from **the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**.
 - ▶ Now what's wrong with knowing good and evil? Why would God prohibit that? It's because that expression "*the knowledge of good and evil*" is referring to a specific type of knowledge that confers independence and autonomy. It's not just about knowing what's right and wrong. It's about declaring independence from God and deciding for yourself what's right and wrong.
- ❖ So in his mercy, God blocked the way to the tree of life. **The last thing he wanted is for his creatures to experience the horror and damage of living independently in defiance of God forever.** And so death was allowed to reign.
 - ▶ But here in the new city, sin is completely gone. Death is put to death. And the tree of life is made available again. There's no need to block that tree anyone since there's no fear of anyone living independently from God – since we'll all be living *in* God!

The Face is There

- ❖ We've saved the best for last. The seventh and final thing we'll see in this new city to come is the face – **the face of God**. Look at chapter 22:4, "*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*"
 - ▶ This is amazing. It actually says we'll get to see the face of God – to gaze directly at the unshielded, unmediated glory of his holy face. That's amazing because throughout Scripture we're told that this is an impossibility for sinful man.
 - **To look directly at God's face would be like looking directly at the sun – if you could imagine the sun a billion times brighter and hotter.** Even Moses, the friend of God (Ex. 33:11), was told by God, "*you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.*" (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16)

- ❖ ***So how is it possible that here, in this future city, we can actually see God's face?*** Because something's changed. It's not God. It's us. We will have been changed. John said in his first epistle that when this final day comes and we're presented to the Groom, "*we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.*" (1 Jn. 3:2) We'll be conformed. We'll be transformed.
 - ▶ In the Bible, a person's name was a reflection of their character. **So when it says in v4 that we'll have God's name on our foreheads, it really means we'll have his character.** We will finally be conformed to the image and likeness of God. This is necessary because without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).
 - But thanks be to God and his grace because on that great wedding day, the Church will be ready. We'll be garbed in righteous deeds, clothed in fine linen, bright and pure, without spot or wrinkle (Rev. 19:7-8; Eph. 5:27). Then shall we see the face of our Groom, Christ Jesus the Lamb.

- ❖ If you are not a Christian here today, consider what you've heard. You have to understand that only those who are Jesus' people will be given this happily ever after. All who are not his people will face an ever after of death, mourning, crying and pain that far surpass our experience in the present. But Jesus came to rescue sinners like you and me. He died once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).
 - ▶ *Will you receive him as your Savior? Will you bow the knee and serve him as Lord?* Those who do have the promise of forgiveness and the hope of heaven – of a new heaven, a new earth, and life everlasting in a new city.