

Open 24/7

Revelation 21:1-6, 21:22-22:5

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When Elie Wiesel wrote about his experience of the holocaust, he called the book *Night*. He was 15 years old when his parents and three sisters were taken to various concentration camps. His mother and younger sister died at Auschwitz. He was sent with his father to Buchenwald where his father died. In the book he describes the horror, the inhumanity, the deprivation that were the holocaust.

Of course he called the book *Night*. I cannot imagine a darker period of human history. It was a time when people's faith was tested to the limit, when hope seemed futile, when there seemed to be no light, only darkness.

We know about night—a child's fear of the dark. We use words like “shadowy” to describe people that are unsavory, sly, mysterious, shady. We know about night and the dark side.

Set beside that image of night this vision that John in Revelation gives us of what heaven is like.

Revelation 21:1-6, 21: 22-22:5

In contrast to the shadowy, fearful darkness of night, heaven is a cascade of light. In John's vision, he sees that the gates of heaven will never be shut by day. Now we might think that the next sentence is going to read: “but they are shut at night.” Except John says: “There will be no night there.” The gates of heaven are never shut; they are open 24/7.

We read here a description of the heavenly city—“It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel.” In its great high walls are all sorts of rare and precious gems—sapphire, agate, emerald, topaz, amethyst, and others I have never heard of. What makes those jewels so valuable is the beautiful things they do to light. Picture the way light dances in the bright green emerald or the rich blue sapphire. See the shine of the light on the streets of gold. As one writer has put it:

The light of heaven is not the blur of a forty watt bulb, hanging naked in the night; it is colors, light that reveals the specific hue and texture of everything in creation. In the light we see not only objects, but also their dazzling, light-charged beauty. In the darkness nothing is visible, in the dusk “all cats are gray,” but in the light we are surrounded by and washed in an exuberant Niagara of color (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 180).

It's a bright and beautiful picture—this heavenly city. But what does it mean? Why did John include this picture of heaven in his writing? Let's go back about 19 centuries. Revelation was written during the dark days of the early church, during the time that felt for many of them like the holocaust. Persecution was on the rise; Christians were meeting secretly for fear of the Roman authorities who saw Christianity as a threat to the emperor. Here was the struggling

little group of Christians standing over against the powerful forces of Rome. The only thing they had to hold on to was their faith in God and their hope.

It was for that struggling group of Christians—who feared that at any moment they may be swallowed by the darkness of the power of Rome—that John painted this picture of God’s light. It’s a picture of the future, a picture of what will be.

What did John want his fellow Christians to know about the future? Above all else, he wanted them to know that the Lord God almighty reigns. In the New Testament, the word “almighty” is used to describe God ten times, and nine of them occur here in the book of Revelation. John wanted those Christians, who felt that they were at the mercy of the power of Rome, to know that God’s power is greater still.

In that day people said, “The future belongs to Rome.” In our day, people say things like “The future belongs to military power; might makes right.” Others who look at things economically might say “The future belongs to China.” Others look at technology and say the future is in computers.” To all that, Revelation says No. Beyond all our human strength, our military might, our economic muscle, our technological advances, is the power of God Almighty. Revelation sings, “The future belongs to God.”

Revelation promised to those caught up in the middle of the persecutions of that day that God is in charge, and that God’s will shall be done. The Lord God almighty reigns.

There is more to the picture of heaven that John gives us here. John reminds us that the one who is sitting on the heavenly throne—God almighty—is the same one who gave his son to die for our salvation. The one whose power is greater than any other power is using that power in love. The Lord God almighty wills our salvation. The God of power is a God of love.

There is still more that we can say about John’s vision of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. I think it is interesting that John chose the image of a city. For many of us today, the city stands for the worst of things—people crammed together, high rises, urban sprawl, crime, dead bolt locks and security systems. If you would ask most people what heaven is like, they may choose a more pastoral image—countryside, peaceful, the sounds of nature, something more like the Garden of Eden. John could have chosen that image for his picture of heaven, but opted instead for a city. Interestingly enough, when St. Augustine described the Kingdom of God, he too used the image of the City of God.

The caricature that that some people have of heaven is a solitary angel floating by on a fluffy cloud playing the harp. But that’s not the picture that Revelation gives. Revelation paints a picture of heaven as being like a city. Why? A city is by definition diverse, made up of many different types of people. At its best a city brings people together. In the city, you are interdependent. The city at its best is where people mix and mingle, where you know your neighbors, where each person does his or her part for the good of the whole. No one can do it all, but with all pulling together the city lives and thrives.

In the city you see people pull together like what happened here in Charlotte after Hurricane Hugo, and in New York after 9/11.

To be sure, this heavenly city will be a different kind of city than what we know. In the heavenly city there will be no hospitals or mortuaries or psychiatrists, because God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be grieving nor crying nor pain. In the heavenly city there will be no street lights to ward off the darkness because God’s light will shine into every corner. In the heavenly city politicians and governments will have no place because the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of

our God and of his Christ. In the heavenly city there will not even be any blustery preachers because there will be no need to remind people of the presence of God.

I think that one of the best contemporary symbols of the heavenly city can be seen at one of our historic cemeteries. Before we moved to this site in the mid-1820's, our church was located over on what is now Highway 51. We had a cemetery there. The cemetery was encircled by a rock wall. Whenever a white member of the church died, that person was buried inside the rock wall. Whenever a black member of the church died, that person was buried outside the rock wall. Back then it was clear who was IN and who was OUT.

But several years ago a group of men started working at that historic cemetery to restore it. It had gotten overgrown with weeds; limbs and trees had fallen; many of the headstones had been broken. So they started to work. A couple of years ago, they put a new fence around the cemetery—around the whole cemetery. So that now everyone buried there—black and white—is inside the fence.

During their time on earth there were things that separated these people from one another—skin color, social class, slave or free. But in heaven all those divisions will be gone. We will all be one—living together as the people of God in God's heavenly city, the new Jerusalem.

Now, I think that John painted this picture of the bright heavenly city in order to give hope to those who were living in a dark and dangerous world. He believed that hope for the future was what enabled people to live faithfully in the present.

The Old Testament passage that we read, and which the choir sang in the anthem, came from another dark time in the life of the Jewish people. They had been defeated in war by the Babylonians, and many of their leading citizens had been killed or shipped off to exile in Babylon. The beautiful temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed; the city walls had been torn down. Their nation was in a shambles. In the years that followed the people looked back on that time as the darkest period in their national life. Those exiles living in Babylon looked wistfully back toward home, but all they could see was the vast expanse of desert, the mountains too high to climb and the valleys too deep to cross. It was to those people—living in the darkness—that Isaiah brought this word of light and hope from God: Comfort, my people. Every valley shall be lifted up; every mountain made low; the crooked will be made straight. The message that Isaiah brought from God was a message of hope: God's will shall be done. And God will bring God's people home.

Isaiah brought this word from God because he believed that hope for the future would enable the people to live faithfully even through the darkness they were experiencing at that moment.

So it is with John's vision of the heavenly city. What we believe about the future has an impact on how we live now. This book of Revelation takes the long view of history. By contrast, our vision is often so limited that we cannot see beyond today, beyond this hurt or that disappointment or failure.

This long view of history does not pretend that there are no hurts or disappointments or failures in life, but it reminds us that they are never the last word. The last word is always light and life, lived in the presence of the almighty and all loving God. That is what the future holds for you and for me. And it is that hope for the future that enables us to live each day. Thanks be to God. †