

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 86 – REVELATION 21 - THE NEW JERUSALEM

Last time we finished with the subject of hell.

- ◆ We saw that hell is reserved for those foolish enough to reject the gift of salvation offered to them by the righteous Judge and Savior, Jesus Christ.
- ◆ Although the odds are stacked in favour of them accepting God's invitation to join Him in heaven, there appears to be some crazy enough to reject the invitation.
- ◆ So God gives them what they desire, life without Him.

The good news is at the end of this period of judgment, the terrible and repetitive history of man's disastrous foray into deciding for himself to be their own god by rejecting His Creator finally comes to an end.

- ◆ Up to this point in the book of Revelation, we have identified the socio, political, economic and spiritual forces that have been in opposition to God's purpose of creating man in His image.
- ◆ After this period of judgment, no longer will these forces that make up the Babylonian system be allowed to disrupt life in God's heavenly kingdom.
- ◆ ***Revelation 21:4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.***
- ◆ From now on there is only life in the new heavens and the new earth where there is no wickedness or evil of any kind (Revelation 21:27; 22:14-15).
- ◆ This is the final scene of the book of Revelation, the culmination of God's purpose to create for Himself a holy people within whom He will dwell and who will participate with Him in the very life and love of the Godhead.
- ◆ This final scene in Revelation is a tale of two cities, a contrast between Babylon and the New Jerusalem.
- ◆ Babylon as we saw was depicted as a harlot riding on the menacing beast.
- ◆ By contrast we now see the New Jerusalem pictured as a beautiful bride betrothed to an animal with a totally different nature, the Lamb of God.
- ◆ ***Revelation 21:2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.***
- ◆ The contrast between the two cities could not be more striking.
- ◆ Clients of a prostitute are seeking sexual pleasure while the harlot prostitutes herself for money.
- ◆ This lifestyle of pleasure and profit personified by the harlot and the beast dehumanises and degraded life.
- ◆ A bride by contrast personifies a lifestyle of faithfulness, commitment and integrity to her husband, principles which enhance and enrich life.
- ◆ Again, John is warning his readers not to be seduced by the outward appearance of the glory of Rome.
- ◆ The church as the bride of Christ has been chosen to faithfully reject the degrading lifestyle of the harlot and instead reflect the life promoting principles of her husband Jesus Christ.
- ◆ One path leads to destruction, the other promotes life.

Then in order to ram the message home as to whom their allegiance belongs, John contrasts the impressive glory of imperial Rome at its height with the coming glory of the New Jerusalem.

- ◆ Rome at its zenith was an impressive city. It still attracts thousands of tourists each year to see its crumbling ruins.
- ◆ Caesar Augustus had transformed Rome from a city covered with bricks to one covered with marble.
- ◆ It was even called the "Eternal City."
- ◆ But it is nothing compared to the description John shares with his readers about the city they represent in Revelation 21.
- ◆ While the city walls of Rome are measured in feet, the walls of New Jerusalem are measured in miles, 1500 miles square, and 1500 miles high, in the shape of a cube.
- ◆ Rome may have its streets paved in marble, but the New Jerusalem streets are paved in gold.
- ◆ The foundation of Rome is built on hills of rock, while the New Jerusalem is built on layers of precious stones.
- ◆ Gates and walls of the New Jerusalem aren't inscribed with the names of famous conquering generals as Rome does, but rather the names of God's faithful, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles.

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- ◆ In contrast to the gates of Rome that were designed to be closed for fortification, the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem are left perpetually open to welcome all who wish to enter to share in the life God intended.
- ◆ While Rome has its temples dedicated to its pagan gods that their worshippers never see, the New Jerusalem has no need of a temple as God now dwells face to face with His people.
- ◆ ***Revelation 21:3 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.***
- ◆ There is no longer a need for temples or priests to mediate worship as humanity now dwells face to face with their God.

And really this is the key to life in heaven.

- ◆ Although the stunning description of heaven with its streets of gold and foundations of precious stones is meant to impress John's readers, to focus on the splendour of the surrounding is to miss the real intention of life in heaven.
- ◆ As we have seen through this series, God has gone to extraordinary lengths to bring about this final conclusion of bringing God and humanity face to face.
- ◆ So the focus of the whole exercise is not to impress us with the splendour of the heavenly surroundings, but rather the reality of living with our God, face to face, sharing in the life and love of the Trinity.

Before we move on to discuss what God has in store for us in the heavenly New Jerusalem, we need to recap the important messages from the book of Revelation.

- ◆ Firstly, there are two major assumptions we can take to the bank and those are, at the end of history, "life," not "destruction" is going to prevail, as God is the life-giver.
- ◆ Second, God in Christ will be there both as Judge and Savior.
- ◆ The good news of the message of grace provided at such great cost is not suddenly ditched at this critical moment in salvation history.
- ◆ As we have learned, no one is excluded without first of all being included (Matthew 22:8-10).

Five guidelines for understanding the book of Revelation.

- ◆ 1) The book in its first instance needs to be looked at in its historical and cultural context.
- ◆ That is, it is written to Christians suffering under persecution in the Roman Empire, not an outline of end time events.
- ◆ 2) Then as the first few verses of the book explain, this is a revelation from Jesus Christ himself.
- ◆ In other words, this is the big picture of all that is taking place on this earth viewed from God's heavenly perspective coming directly from Jesus Christ Himself, the great "unveiler."
- ◆ 3) The major theme running through the book is one of allegiance; to which kingdom will you give your allegiance? To God's kingdom of light or the kingdom of darkness.
- ◆ The warning to the churches in chapters two and three is to remain faithful and not to become lukewarm or compromise with the culture of the Roman Empire.
- ◆ 4) Revelation then uses startling images to depict the world as a place of struggle between these two contrasting kingdoms.
- ◆ The book reveals the character of the forces at work in the world by portraying them as a clash between the menacing evil beast and the Lamb whose robe is covered in blood.
- ◆ The beast wins victory by subjugating others through violence; the Lamb wins victory through self-sacrifice.
- ◆ The beast seeks domination by wielding the power of death; the Lamb seeks victory by giving life through death.
- ◆ John then contrasts the characteristics of the great harlot riding the beast with the bride of Christ.
- ◆ The harlot degrades and dehumanises life through the pursuit of pleasure, profit and power.
- ◆ The bride by contrast exhibits principles that enhance life, faithfulness, commitment and integrity to her husband.
- ◆ And finally, Revelation contrasts the glory of Rome built on the commodity of "human beings sold as slaves" with the glory of the New Jerusalem built on the precious body and blood of Jesus Christ.

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- ◆ These images are designed to startle people into seeing the destructive forces of evil at work in the world and then to warn them not to be seduced by them even though they may look enticing.
- ◆ 5) The focus of the book needs to be viewed from a perspective of hope, not fear.
- ◆ Many look on the symbolism and events portrayed in the book of Revelation with trepidation, but this is mainly because of the confusing speculations commentators have made of the book down through the centuries.
- ◆ The emphasis of this commentary has been on end time events with foreboding images of Armageddon, terrifying beasts, a fiery red dragon, a lake of fire, etc.
- ◆ Just to emphasise one of these misleading images, let's look at the question of the "antichrist."
- ◆ The prevailing view of the antichrist in much of this commentary is applied to the great tyrant, usually represented as the beast who will oppose Christ at the end of the age.
- ◆ This interpretation has two problems. First we saw that the beast is not an individual, but rather a political system in opposition to the system represented by the Lamb.
- ◆ Secondly, if we allow scripture to identify who the antichrist is, we will see John uses the term to refer to those who spread an heretical message.
- ◆ The term antichrist is only used in 1 and 2 John and it appears four times.
- ◆ ***2 John 1:7 I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.***
- ◆ The term is applied to those who were part of the Christian community, but have since departed over the issue of Christ's nature of being both divine and human.
- ◆ ***1 John 2:18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.***
- ◆ They had denied Jesus was human and were thus anti-Christ, and this is why the word is used in the plural, many anti-Christ.
- ◆ As the word implies, the term is used of anyone who preaches a false gospel and as such history is littered with antichrists (Galatians 1:8-9).
- ◆ The lesson being we get a more accurate perspective of truth if we allow the biblical texts to interpret events.
- ◆ This principle applies just as much to the book of Revelation as it does in this case of the antichrist.
- ◆ Rather than viewing the book with fear based on trumped up speculation, we need to have a realistic interpretation of events.
- ◆ And in contrast the trumped up speculation, the book does not end with fear, but with hope.
- ◆ It's a story of victory over the forces that would destroy life.
- ◆ In the final vision death, sorrow and grief are banished.
- ◆ Injustice and evil will not have the final say, God will see to that.
- ◆ In its place, the book points to a future way beyond anything humans can imagine.
- ◆ This is the future promised to those whose allegiance rests with the Lamb of God.
- ◆ ***Revelation 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.***