

The New Jerusalem

Revelation 21

Those who work with stories know there are two basic types of stories; comedies and tragedies. If a story ends in a funeral, it's a tragedy. If it ends in a wedding, it's a comedy. Not a comedy in turns of laughter, but in terms of joy, of a happy ending. That's why the Bible doesn't end with a funeral, not even a "ruined" one like the ones Jesus attends where he raises the dead and ends the need for the funeral. Instead, the Bible ends with a wedding. It ends with a marriage celebration full of joy, one that celebrates God not just visiting his people, but living with us, dwelling with us, forever.

That's what we see as we jump ahead to the penultimate chapter of Revelation. John uses two images to describe what happens here. The first image is the city itself, Jerusalem. We're shown a picture of a new, different, perfect one, but it's based on all that we know about the old, earthly Jerusalem. The second image is that Jerusalem comes down like a bride. All cleaned up, beautified beyond belief. A homecoming and a wedding, all in one.

Jerusalem comes from two Hebrew words that together mean "foundation of peace." Unfortunately, the city rarely lived up to that name. It might be the city that Melchizedek comes from, who is just described as coming from "Salem" which means "peace." Jerusalem's first mention in full comes as Joshua and the Israelites are going through the land, conquering the various city states that are there. After that, the Old Testament's mentions of Jerusalem are full of descriptions of civil wars and coups, insurrections and invasions. Extra biblical world history isn't much kinder. Even today there seems to be at best an uneasy peace between the three world religions and two main ethnic groups that claim Jerusalem as theirs.

But Jerusalem, of all the cities in the world, is important because it's where God chose to dwell. It's where God chose to live with His people in the temple. It's where God chose to have the most important event of the world happen. It's where Jesus died, and rose again. No other spot on Earth can claim that honor.

As Americans, our capital evokes that same mix of emotions. School kids take field trips to see the great historical monuments there, to see the impressive buildings that our government is located in. Yet it's also a city we joke about as full of sin and corruption, with buildings barricaded and fenced off due to protestors and rioters. It's a city that has been the source of great justice and aspirations, yet also the source of great injustice and cynicism.

And so as John begins to wrap up Revelation, he ends with Jerusalem. Not the old, earthly one, with all of its warts and blemishes. Instead, he ends with the New Jerusalem. The city whose gates never need to be shut, because there is no night and no threat of invasion.

This final vision shows John, and us, the city of God, descending from heaven, dressed as a bride adorned for her bridegroom. At this point, John's visions cease and we find him with his face buried in the earth, bowing in worship. And when he finally does speak, all he can say is "Come. Come Lord Jesus. Come."

That's what lies at the heart of John's vision. The foolish intimacy of God. John's vision is not just about a bride but about a bride and a bridegroom and the intimacy of God. John's vision starts with a large landscape, a new heaven and a new earth.

Then he takes us in closer to see the New Jerusalem, the holy city, descending as a bride

from heaven. Then we get closer still, before the very throne of God, and we hear God the Father speak for the second time in Revelation. And he says, “Behold the dwelling of God is with his people.” God is dwelling with his people. God has chosen to spend eternity with you. In Christ, God’s love is eternally wrapped up with the lives of his people . . . for better for worse. Though we try to turn him into a servant in our self-help programs. Though we become argumentative and ugly in our mission to save the church. Though we, the bride of Christ, becomes Bridezilla, fighting against Christ the bridegroom and his family, and though she does everything she can to destroy her own wedding, even to the point of killing her bridegroom, still, he loves. He comes, he dies, and in that murder is the mystery of our marriage. You are a bride . . . drop-dead gorgeous . . . because Christ died for you.

Nothing you do could ever make you into a bride. Even in this love is love, everything goes culture we’re in, you can’t make yourself a bride. You are a bride because someone loves you. Some fool promises to be with you for the rest of his life. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, he will forsake all others and love you, even laying down his life for you.

And that image of sacrificial love, of undeserved love that comes from outside you, is the image God has used to describe his love for his people throughout the Bible. I had an Old Testament professor in seminary who said that God and the people of Israel were only dating until after the Exodus. On Mount Sinai, where the covenant was signed, they got married. Paul continued to use that image to describe how Christ loves the church. And now John continues that same image.

Everything Christ has ever done has been done in love for you. His life, his death, his resurrection . . . for you. You stand here in the

righteousness of Christ, beautiful in his baptism, glorious in his grace, and he promises to come and reveal this to the world. Until that time, he has given you this little vision in your mental sky. It’s there so that you will always remember who you are. The bride of Christ, God’s own creation.

As the bride of Christ, then, we look ahead to that New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth. We look ahead to when creation will be restored. We look ahead to when we will dwell with God, when God will dwell with us. We look ahead in faith.

As Christians—God’s forgiven people—we “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16a). By faith we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth. And by faith we look for the City of God, the New Jerusalem that will come down to earth from heaven on the Last Day. Ghostly ballplayers may think that Iowa is heaven as they play on the Field of Dreams, but we know heaven is more than that.

Jerusalem is our happy home—not Ames, not Iowa, not the United States, not even earth as we know it, or heaven as we imagine it. By faith we are “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). Ultimately, “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20).

God comes down to earth in the New Jerusalem. God comes again to dwell with his people. God will not leave. Sin will no longer separate us from God or each other. We will be His people, He will be our God, and nothing will ever change that ever again. What a wonderful promise.

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May 15, 2022