

## REV 21:1-22:5—THE NEW JERUSALEM

**INTRO:** Have you ever thought about what eternity will be like? Magazine cartoons, of course, portray people walking on clouds wearing robes, maybe with wings or carrying harps. That's OK I guess. At least it's better than the cartoon version of hell, with smoke and fire and demons with pitchforks.

On the other hand, we all know the polka **“In heaven there is no beer”**—which doesn't make heaven sound too appealing for all those who like good beer.

The Bible does tell us that there will, in fact, be a new kind of existence—an eternal existence—for every human being who is now walking on this earth. But the Bible paints a completely different picture of what eternity is like from *any* popular depiction. And we should consider this for at least two related reasons: (1) to have some idea of what we might be getting into; and (2) to ask ourselves “Is this really what we want?”

So today we are going to look at the Bible's most detailed description of eternity—**Rev 21:1-22:5**—what is called the “new heaven and new earth.”

But before we do that, we need to understand three things:

First, the Bible says that there will be two eternities that are radically different from each other. They are not called heaven and hell but the lake of fire (also called the “second death”) and the new earth, which is also called new Jerusalem. Whether our destiny is the new earth or the lake of fire is based solely on our relationship with Jesus Christ. IOW, what we do about Jesus *now* determines where we will be *then*.

Second, the Bible does *not* answer the questions regarding eternity that most of us ask and is not explicit or clear about the things that most of us are interested in—like: What kind of body will I have? Will I live in a mansion? What will we spend our time doing? Will I see my grandmother again? and *Is* there beer in heaven?

Instead, the biblical description of eternity, in essence, is answering questions that most of us do *not* ask. The description of the new heaven and new earth in **Rev 21-22** fulfills God's plan begun in **Gen 1**. It is an outgrowth of the values and priorities emphasized throughout the Bible. And specifically, the new earth consummates the values, priorities, relationships, and goals that Jesus came to earth to embody and proclaim.

Third, the book of Revelation in general and **Rev 21-22** in particular is what is known as apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic is a particular form of prophecy. It flourished from about 250 BC until AD 200 in some Jewish and Christian circles. Apocalyptic uses picture language. Apocalyptic images are not meant to be taken “literally” in the sense of portraying physical things. Rather, apocalyptic images are meant to be taken symbolically as representing almost unimaginable spiritual realities.

For example, in **Rev 4:1** heaven is pictured as a throne room, and in **Rev 6:9** it is pictured as a temple. One commentator says, **“It is precisely the fluidity of apocalyptic thinking which makes this possible. . . . In fact, God does not sit upon a throne; he is an eternal Spirit who neither stands or sits or reclines. The picture of God seated upon his throne is a symbolic way of asserting the kingship and sovereignty of the Deity.”**

This is important for our understanding of Revelation. Greg Beale of Westminster Seminary puts it like this: in light of the explicitly symbolic nature of the book, “the dictum of the popular approach to Revelation—[to] interpret literally unless you are forced to interpret symbolically—should be turned on its head.” Instead, we should interpret symbolically unless we are forced to interpret literally.

With those three important understandings in mind, let us turn to **Rev 21** and **22**. [READ **Rev 21-22:5**]

**PROP: If we are faithful to Christ in this life we are guaranteed an everlasting existence fantastic beyond our imagination.**

**O/S:** We will see this as we see (1) how this passage describes the new heaven and new earth as both a city and a bride; (2) the passage then describes what the new heaven and new earth does NOT include; and (3) the passage emphasizes what the new earth IS like.

### **I. The new heaven and new earth are described both as a city and a bride.**

Notice right away in vv. 1-2 it says **“I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.”** Then in vv. 9-10 the angel said **“Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”**

There are two things this is telling us:

**A. First, the new heaven and new earth fulfills the biblical promise that when Christ comes again one of the things that entails is the renewing of creation.** For example, **Acts 3:20-21** states that Christ's coming again will bring **"the restoration of all things."** Similarly, **Rom 8** says that the whole creation groans under the curse but will be set free from its slavery to corruption. That will happen when Jesus comes again. So here we get a glimpse of the *new heaven* and *new earth*.

**1. When John talks about the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, do not think of new Jerusalem simply as a part of the new heaven and new earth.** Rather, new Jerusalem is another description of the new earth. We see this when we understand that new Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, clearly contrasts with Babylon the great, the mother of harlots. Just as Babylon was a *worldwide* entity described both as a city and a woman, as we saw when we looked at **Rev 17**, so is new Jerusalem.

**2. It's sort of like in Rev 5 when the angel asked, "Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals?"** One of the 24 elders told John **"the Lion of the tribe of Judah is worthy to open it."** But when John looked, he saw a Lamb that had been slain. There was not a Lion *and* a Lamb, but the Lion *was* the Lamb. The same is true here. God's plan from **Gen 1** onwards always was to have the whole earth filled with His glory as He lives among His holy people. The *worldwide* nature of God's plan finds its consummation here, as the new earth is equated with new Jerusalem.

**B. Second, in addition to renewing all of creation, the new heaven and new earth means the restoration of relationships among people and with God.** In **v.9** the angel says, **"Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb,"** and he showed John the holy city, new Jerusalem. Again, new Jerusalem *is* the bride. John is mixing metaphors here, which is very typical of apocalyptic literature.

**1. Remember, Revelation is a vision.** John is answering questions that most of us don't ask. His interest primarily is in describing God's people and relationships rather than describing geography. In **Gen 1** God's people begin in a garden—in Eden. Here, in Revelation, we end in a city. A city implies community and relationship, not Lone Rangers. We are forever going to be in perfect, loving, intimate relationship with God and with each other. Thus, the *relational* nature of God's plan from **Gen 1** onward finds its consummation here, as the new Jerusalem is equated with the bride of the Lamb.

**2. And notice something else.** In **v.9** God's people are described *both* as the "bride" and the "wife" of the Lamb. As one commentator states, **"The specification of the woman as bride evokes the notion of newness and ardor, and the reference to Jerusalem as wife suggests enduring fidelity and fruitfulness. Thus, in designating the New Jerusalem as bride and wife, John is telling us of the city's beauty, and the intimacy and fruitfulness of the relationship between God and the redeemed in the apocalyptic age."**

**3. Both images of a city and a bride describe fundamentally the same thing: God's people in fellowship with their Redeemer.** So already we are seeing that the focus of John's concern in eternity is on the intimacy of the relationships between God and His people, not on what each individual will look like, will have, or will do. As we are about to see, however, the nature of the new earth is such that we have no reason at all to worry about all of those individual matters that concern us so much. They will take care of themselves.

So let us turn to:

## **II. What the new earth, new Jerusalem, does NOT include.**

I see four categories of things that John mentions.

**A. First, v.1 concludes with the statement, "There no longer is any sea."** Once again, do not take this physically. This is not a comment on the hydrology of new Jerusalem. The ancient Israelites were not a sea-faring people. Their enemies, the Philistines, were sea-faring people. To the Israelites, the sea was the source of chaos and evil. Revelation tends to equate the sea with chaos and evil. For example, in **Rev 12** Satan is cast down to the earth **"and the sea."** In **Rev 13** the beast arises **"from the sea."** So here, John begins his description of the new earth by assuring us that for all of eternity there will no longer be any chaos or evil, because the source or home of chaos and evil exists no more.

**B. Second, in the new Jerusalem there will be no painful, sorrowful, or evil events or occurrences.** **v.4** tells us that God **"will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."** All sorrow, pain, death, failure, regret, beating yourself up over what you did or failed to do, will be things of the past.

**C. Third, vv. 8 and 27 go on to tell us that in the new Jerusalem there will no longer be any evil people.** We all know that each one of us has within us the seeds of untruthfulness, immorality, cowardice, violence, and sin. And we have acted upon all of those things. But the reason why some will be in new Jerusalem and some will experience the second death is revealed in **v.27**: those in the new Jerusalem are those **"whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."** It is the Lamb—Jesus—and *only* the Lamb who can and does redeem people. That's why in **Rev 5** when John looked to see who was worthy to open the book and break the seals he

saw a Lamb who had been slain. Jesus was slain for you and for me because He alone bore our sins and paid the price that otherwise we would have to pay for sinning against a holy God. What we do *now* determines where and how we will spend our eternity. If you are not united with Jesus by faith, then receive Him now, and live for Him. The stakes are too high not to.

**D. Fourth, what Jesus does is more profound than just saving individuals—He dealt with the root cause.** **Rev 22:3** says, “**There no longer will be any curse.**” It was the curse, found in **Gen 3**, that affected not only all people but all of creation. By removing the curse, Christ has redeemed all of creation and everyone and everything in it. That is why there will no longer be any chaos, death, pain, tears, evil events or evil people—because they all stemmed from the curse—but in the new heaven and new earth that will be gone forever.

So that is what the new earth does *not* include. But what is the new earth *like*?

### **III. What the new earth is like.**

There also appear to be four categories of things that John emphasizes about the nature and character of the new earth.

**A. First, there will be life in all its fullness and abundance, its joy and satisfaction.** That’s why **v.6** and **22:1-2** talk about “**the spring of the water of life,**” “**the river of the water of life,**” and “**the tree of life.**” Remember again, this is a vision; these are pictures to convey important truths, not a map that shows “here is the spring and there is the river.” What this language is telling us is that what was lost in the Garden of Eden will be regained here, but greater than ever and never to be lost again. The full potentialities, hopes, and dreams of life will at last be completely realized forever. If that’s not something to look forward to, then I don’t know what is.

**B. Second, there will be value, riches, and beauty beyond compare.** **vv. 11** and **19-21** use the symbolic imagery of pearls, precious stones, and pure gold to convey the utter value and beauty of this place and of our eternal existence. Nothing shoddy, second rate, or deteriorating—but wonderful in every way.

**C. Third, all people will be in relationship with *each other*, characterized by perfect unity, harmony, and oneness.** For example, **vv. 12-14** talk about the gates and foundation stones of the city wall of new Jerusalem. That is simply 1<sup>st</sup> century imagery that 1<sup>st</sup> century people could relate to. But John’s point is not architectural, but spiritual. So don’t be like one preacher I heard who said “when we get there, I’ll meet you by the middle gate on the eastern wall.” He was taking things literally and physically, and missed the whole point.

And what is the point?

**1. v.25** says that “**the gates will never be closed.**” In ancient cities they closed the gates at night to keep out evil people and enemies. But **v.25** and **22:5** tell us that in the new Jerusalem there is no night—IOW, there no longer is anything to fear; as we saw, there are no evil people or enemies; there is perfect peace with no chaos or evil to threaten us; so the gates are never closed.

**2. But there is a deeper point.** **v.12** tells us that the names of the 12 tribes of Israel are on the gates and **v.14** says that the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb are on the foundation stones. **v.17** adds that the thickness of the wall is 144 cubits. The NASB erroneously converts this to English measurements and says the wall is “72 yards.” But that is taking things physically and missing the numeric symbolism. The ESV correctly says “144 cubits.” The number is clearly symbolic, based on 12x12. In a footnote my ESV says, “**All the dimensions of the city reveal its associations with the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. 12 symbolically designates the people of God.**” What John is saying is that the redeemed people of new Jerusalem consist equally of the OT and NT Messianic Community in perfect harmony.

**3. Interestingly, since the OT came first in the biblical storyline, you might expect that the names of the 12 tribes would be on the foundation stones.** But they are not. The names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb are. I think that is telling us that Christ is the foundation for everything. OT believers looked forward to the coming of Christ; NT believers look back to His coming. But either way, this imagery is again reminding us that to be included in new Jerusalem, we need the right foundation—to be rightly related to Jesus Christ *now*.

**D. And that leads to the fourth characteristic of the new Jerusalem—and this is really the ultimate consummation—namely, God will be present with us forever in all His glory.** You may recall that, in the beginning of creation, in **Gen 3:8** God walked with man in the Garden of Eden. In the new earth the relationship between God and mankind will far exceed anything that has ever gone before. We see this in **v. 3** (“**God will dwell among His people, and they shall be His people and God Himself will be among them**”); **v.7** (“**I will be his God and he shall be my son**”); **vv. 22-24** tell us that **God and the Lamb are the temple and will illumine the new Jerusalem;** and **22:3** adds that **God and the Lamb will be in the city.**

**1. But there’s more.** Probably the greatest and most important person in the OT was Moses. Moses was called the friend of God. But when he asked God to show him His glory, God said, “**You cannot see my face, for no man can see Me and live.**” But now, in new Jerusalem, **Rev 22:4-5** tells us that **we will see His face.** But not only that. Those verses go on to say **God’s name will be on the peoples’ foreheads; God will illumine**

**His people; and we will reign with Him forever and ever.**

2. This is really almost beyond our comprehension. But one more aspect of the new Jerusalem shows us the amazing depth of what will be our new relationship with God. **Rev 21:16** says, **“The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as its width; and he measured the city with the rod, 12,000 stadia; its length and width and height are equal.”**

3. Again, the NASB erroneously converts 12,000 stadia to English miles and says “1500 miles.” But John said “12,000 stadia.” That number is clearly symbolic, based on 12x1000. It is not describing geography at all. So don’t make the mistake of thinking of a three-dimensional city like that in the movie “The Fifth Element,” with flying taxis and all that. No. John is not speaking of geography or city planning; he is speaking symbolically.

4. And what is he saying? The key is when he says **“its length, width, and height are equal.”** That describes a perfect cube. There is only one other place in the Bible that describes a perfect cube. Do you know what it is? The Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the room in the temple that was filled with the shekinah glory of God. It was the holiest, most sacred place in the entire world. What John is saying is that the entire new earth, new Jerusalem, *is* a Holy of Holies.

(a) Just like the Holy of Holies, the new Jerusalem is described as a perfect cube.

(b) Just as the Holy of Holies was overlaid with pure gold, **Rev 21:18** says **“the city was pure gold, like clear glass.”**

5. But once again, new Jerusalem far surpasses the Holy of Holies:

(a) The Holy of Holies was the place of God’s special presence and glory. But now, in new Jerusalem, the entire new earth is filled with God’s special presence and glory. And God’s special presence and glory will be direct and personal in a way that He has never manifested Himself before. That’s why **v.22** says there will be no temple but **“the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”** IOW, no longer is anyone required to mediate between God and mankind, but we will experience God directly and personally—because in New Jerusalem, *all* of God’s people are without sin, the nations are healed, we will *all* be in God’s immediate presence, and we will serve the Lord and reign forever and ever.

(b) That’s also why **v.23** and **22:3** say there is no sun or moon, but God and the Lamb illumine us. We will have direct and personal access to God and illumination by God forever. It’s like this: In **Gen 1** God created the heavens and the earth. There was a separation. But now, in new Jerusalem, the heaven and the earth are no longer divided, but are merged. *Heaven has come to earth.* There is no longer any need of sun or moon. We are in a whole other realm, God’s realm, a *new* heaven and *new* earth where, as **21:4** says, **“the first things have passed away.”**

This is all really hard to envision—which is why John could only describe it using apocalyptic and symbolic language.

**CONCL:** Let me make a few concluding remarks. The new heaven and new earth, otherwise known as new Jerusalem, fulfill and consummate God’s plan from the beginning of creation to fill the entire earth with His glory as He lives among His holy people. Whether we are a part of that or not depends on what we do now: specifically, on whether or not we have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. As we have seen, the focus of **Rev 21-22** is *not* on our individual lives but on *community*—our relationships with one another and with God.

Is that what we want? Is that what we are longing for? For many of us the answer may be, **“I guess so; it’s certainly better than the alternative, but I can wait; the whole thing sounds very foreign to me.”** If that is the case, it simply reflects that all of us have something wrong deep within us that doesn’t see the stunning beauty and overwhelming goodness of God and of a world populated by absolutely Christlike people.

Revelation is designed in large part to get us to assess ourselves: Who or what is most important to us? Do we really want to be like Christ or not? Do we really want to be healed inside and out and be completely holy? The starting point for many of us may be to pray, **“Lord, help me to desire you, to desire to be with you forever, as much as you desire me.”** Begin there. Keep the end in mind. Meditate on its beauty and goodness in all its aspects. As we do this, by God’s grace, slowly by slowly that prayer will truly become the burning desire of our hearts. And as *that* happens we will start being changed into the radiant creatures we someday will become.