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Revelation 21: 1-8, 22-27
The Wrath...of the Lamb?!



Surprisingly, the Bible does not have much to say about heaven. By and large it is thoroughly rooted in this life, but the promises made for the next life that we do find are more hints at the glory that awaits than concrete facts.

Last week, when we spoke about Revelation's fearsome images, we made note that they are allegories meant to convey something powerful and at times incomprehensible. They are more like a Picasso impressionist painting than a photorealistic image.

The same is true for the images of heaven in Revelation. They offer something resplendent with the iridescent, precious stones like jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx and more that make up the walls of the city. We should not actually expect the walls of heaven to be encrusted with jewels, rather the jewels listed are precisely the same stones that were embedded on the High Priest's breastplate, and it just so happens there were 12 of them – each one representing a tribe of Israel. This means the whole city contains the sacred and precious people of God.

Revelation employs an ancient philosophical technique to explain the inexplicable...*Via Negativa*, the negative way. Rather than stating what heaven is, it begins by stating what it is not.

Revelation 21 tells us there will be no more sea, no more sun or moon, no more temple, no more tears, no more pain, no more mourning and no more death.

The absence of each opens up an aspect of heaven's glory.

The sea was an ancient symbol of chaos, disorder. If you remember your Greek mythology, even the mighty Zeus could not fully control Poseidon in his domain. In scripture, Leviathan is an ancient sea dragon that represents those destructive forces of the sea, and clearly the disciples' fears of the storm on the Sea of Galilee included a sense of otherworldly dread in addition to the power of the waves. Jesus used the exact same words to calm the sea that he used to exorcise demons.

Thus, the total absence of the sea indicates that heaven will be a place of perfect peace, harmony, and order. For you type A personalities I am sure you are pleased to hear this news! No discordant notes in the kingdom! For the chaotic pace of life today and the forces of disorder and chaos that constantly threaten our sanity, heaven truly sounds like a heavenly place.

There is neither sun nor moon because there is no need for anything to light our path, to show us the way, for Revelation tells us God's very self will be our light and the lamp is the

lamb. We will no longer need to seek Wikipedia for insight – we will have direct access to the divine.

There is no temple because the demarcation between the sacred and the profane is obliterated. There is no need to go to a special place to be in God's presence or to feel the love of the lamb, for the whole city is the dwelling place of God.

There are no more tears nor pain because all that robs life of being vibrant and joyful life will be no more.

Finally, there is no more death. A deceptively simple statement. Sure, no heaven no death. But death is not only the failing of this mortal coil but those parts of us that die inside in the face of evil and loss. The apostle Paul tells us that death itself is the final enemy defeated by Christ, that it has lost its sting. But what is the sting of death but the sense of the permanency of something that we love being extinguished from existence.

It is one thing to send someone we love on a long voyage, surely our heart aches – but death is that crushing force that destroys our peace and at times slices off a chunk of our soul, especially when it is a child, beloved spouse, or a dear friend. A part of us dies with them.

It is the ache that never truly leaves us. Anyone who has lost someone they dearly loved knows that even decades later at times the grief is simply debilitating. I remember standing before my sister Rachel's grave in Chapecó, Brazil, some 25 years after she was lost, an older sister who died before I was born, and still there was a crushing weight on my soul.

But Revelation suggests that the weight on my soul, and your soul, and everyone's, will be permanently lifted.

And yet, there are other parts of Revelation that suggest a finality of certain deaths that extinguish souls for eternity. Revelation 20:15 tells us, "...*anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*" And in 21:8 we read, "*Their place will be in the lake that burns with fire...the second death.*"

And yet even the meaning of this second death is not so clear. The term does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, but it does appear in oral traditions of certain books. These oral traditions are known as *Targums* and were later written down.

There is debate within Judaism what the term second death means in *Targum Isaiah*. Some believe it describes the death of the soul but Israel Abraham's *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* points that this plain reading, "...*cannot be accepted without qualification. For in its paraphrase of Isaiah 65:6 the Targum uses the expression: "I will deliver."* That is, people will even be delivered from the second death. This was the point of view of the 4th century Bishop Gregory, of Nyssa, who helped develop the doctrine of the Trinity wrote:

Those still living in the flesh just as much as they can separate and free themselves in a way from its attachments by virtuous conduct, in order that after death they may not need a second death to cleanse them from the remnants that are owing to this cement of the flesh.

In Gregory's case, he saw this second death as a final redemption not extinction, more like the refiner's fire in the Old Testament, which describes God's purpose for fire as a process of purification, not of destruction.

The Bible is very clear. Faith in Christ is critical, God reaps where God does not sow, and God's wrath burns hot against evil. We are told nothing unclean will enter this heavenly city in Revelation.

So, in the end we have no clean answers. But Revelation does leave us with a sense of the incredible expansiveness of God's grace. In addition to the promise of no more death, we have two very powerful and evocative visions of hope.

In ancient times cities fortified themselves with thick walls and sturdy gates. At night they were shut to prevent anyone who did not belong from entering. But Revelation 21:25 says, *"Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there."* The forever open gates suggest that in some way beyond our understanding, hope is never lost.

Secondly, this heavenly city is really, really, REALLY big! Last week we learned that *"there was a great multitude no one could count..."* streaming into heaven. This week we have an idea of just how great a multitude that might be.

First, note that heaven is a city. As I have said before, that should make New Yorkers happy! It is not the place of solitude in the Elysian Fields of Greek myth. Cities are places of inextricable mutual interdependence, cultural exchange, in which the broad swaths of

humanity are all present together. Being a New Yorker is such a joy because I can go on the Westside for excellent Ethiopian food. I can go to the Lower East Side to Katz Deli for the best pastrami in the world and then venture over to Brooklyn for endless scrumptious pizza parlors. Cities are great! We can hear the most glorious, majestic symphonic music at Lincoln Center or take a stroll in the park to hear jazz and then pop down to Greenwich Village to hear Brazilian hip hop! But I digress.

John tells us this city is a cube, 1,500 miles on each side! To grasp its size, imagine the continental United States then cut it in half. That is the base of this huge city. Then imagine this city goes upward 1,500 miles!! To get a sense of how many people such a city can hold we will use Manhattan as an example. Manhattan is about 22 square miles, with an elevation of 1,250 feet, with about 1.6 million residents.

We could fit enough Manhattans in this new city to hold 108 trillion people!!!! According to one estimate, that means this heaven can hold thousands of times the number of people that have ever lived!!! Amen.