

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

Rodger Dalman

CHAPTER 21: THE NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH

To understand Revelation 21 and 22, it is important to start with Revelation 10. Satan's armies had been destroyed at Armageddon, and Christ had returned to earth. The Lord had in His right hand the open book of history from Revelation 5 and 6. History could now be understood from the exile to Christ's second coming. Then something unexpected happened. As Christ spoke, seven peals of thunder sounded. John began to write what the thunder had said, but he was told to seal it up and not write it. History after Christ's return is still sealed, and it is not opened by the Revelation. Isaiah 32:3-4 promised that when Christ returned, people would understand what the Scriptures had said all along. Until then, people could only compare Scriptures and struggle to understand. The biggest problem is that prophecy spoke about history symbolically. Some verses are an amazingly accurate portrayal of historical events. Other verses can only be understood as symbols. When trying to read a sealed book, it is hard to say where accurate description ends and symbolism begins.

Until now, Revelation has taught that the final judgment would come near Christ's coming. When discussing Christ's kingdom, even this becomes ambiguous. Nothing about the kingdom fits together completely. Revelation 21:1-4 concluded the overview of history found in Revelation 20. Do these verses describe history after the judgment, or are they a different perspective on the period between Armageddon and the judgment? John said that he saw a new heaven and a new earth, but everything he said about them was drawn from descriptions of Christ's reign in the New Jerusalem. Do these verses describe a millennium of Christ's reign on earth before the final judgment, or do they describe the beginning of His eternal kingdom? It is confusing, and it probably will not be completely understood until it happens.

Verse 1

The problems begin with the first verse. John saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. This presents a couple of problems. First, why was there no sea? Revelation 10:2 claimed that Christ stood on the sea and the land after He returned. Ezekiel added that waters flowing from the temple would make the sea fresh (Ezekiel 47:8). Isaiah said that after Christ returned, the abundance of the sea would be turned to Israel (Isaiah 60:5). So why did John say that there was no sea? John could be talking about a different age, although Ezekiel's vision sounded a lot like John's vision. Ezekiel might also be describing the sea of the gentiles. At His return, Christ would stand (or rule over) the land of Israel and the sea of the gentiles. Then the abundance of the gentiles would be turned to Him. The problem with this interpretation is Ezekiel 47:11. Ezekiel said that the salt marshes would not be made fresh. This sounded like an accurate description of a historical event.

Another problem in verse 1 is that the first heaven and earth had passed away. Did the Bible say that this planet would disappear? In Revelation 20:11, John said that heaven and earth fled from Christ's presence, and no place was found for them. Was John describing the earth or the men in it? Did Revelation 20:11 mean that the earth would disappear or that people would be judged? Another passage which described the world's end was II Peter 3:7-13. Peter said that the present heavens and earth were preserved for fire and kept for the day of judgment. Peter added, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief when the heavens would pass away with intense heat. The earth and its works will be burned. ... According to His promise, we are looking for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells." Peter seemed to be saying that the earth would be melted down and replaced.

The problem with this interpretation is that Peter could be describing Armageddon. Peter said that the day would come like a thief. I Thessalonians 5:2-3 also noted that the day of the Lord would come like a thief as men were saying, "Peace and safety." This was the Antichrist's rallying cry before Armageddon. The Antichrist's drawing card was that he offered peace through a united world government. Joel 3:14-15 also described the day of the Lord as Armageddon. If the world was destroyed in the fire of Armageddon,

this was not the end of the earth. People still cursed God after this time (Revelation 9:20), and Christ would still return to stand on the earth. Some verses seem to say that Christ would reign on Mount Zion forever. If Peter was not describing the end of the planet, would this earth pass away?

One answer might be that the new earth would not be a different planet at all. When the Bible used the word "new," it did not always mean something that had not already existed. When God redeemed His creation, He gave it a continual daily newness. Lamentations 3:22-23 said that God's mercy never failed because it was new every morning. God's mercy was continually new. In mercy, God made things new. Paul explained in II Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come." God redeemed man, and he became a new creation. Now according to Romans 7:6, people served God in newness of the Spirit. The same thing may happen when God redeemed His earth by judgment. God would burn the earth with the fires of Armageddon. Christ would begin to renew the earth. Armageddon may devastate the earth nearly as completely as Noah's flood, so Christ's renewal may bring a new earth. Little of the old earth may be left.

If Christ will rule on earth forever, when will the lost be judged? Scripture is not very clear. One section which illustrates the problems is Isaiah 65:17-25. Isaiah said in 65:17, "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered or come to mind." Isaiah went on to describe the peace and prosperity of the new earth. However, Isaiah added, "No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days or an old man who does not live out his days. For the youth will die at the age of a hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought cursed." Isaiah said that people would be born and die in the new earth. That does not fit very well into any historical interpretation of the prophets. Children could be born in the millennium from a pre-millennial eschatology, but not in the new earth (cf. Matthew 22:30). According to Revelation 21:4, there would be no more death. So how could people die? There are possible answers. Since God's newness is a daily thing, Isaiah may have described a time before the final judgment. However, if the eternal state is not the new earth, then what is it? Then the Bible may say little or nothing about life after the judgment. These verses could also be talking about the blessedness of the church or perhaps Israel. Another alternative would be that Isaiah did not mean to suggest that people would actually live to be at least 100 years old. Isaiah may just have described the blessedness of that age. Of course, Isaiah 65:17 could describe the new earth while Isaiah 65:18-25 described the time before the beginning of the new earth. That would cut up the account in a way that may be hard to justify. The closer the Scriptures are examined, the more confusing its kingdom prophecies become.

Verses 2-4

The new Rome had decimated God's people and had overrun Jerusalem. God responded by destroying man's empire and sending it to hell. Then God brought the New Jerusalem down from heaven. This may be a physical city on a high mountain in Israel. Hebrews 11:10 claimed that Abraham was looking for a city with foundations whose builder and maker was God. Hebrews 11:16 added that God had prepared a city for the Old Testament saints. The city that God prepared may be the New Jerusalem although it was described in terms that had to be at least partly symbolic. Revelation 21 and 22 described this city in more detail. If the New Jerusalem might be a physical city, it was also more than this. It was also the whole body of believers through all of time. John called Jerusalem a bride adorned for her husband. Christ's bride was His church. Jerusalem would be married to Christ when He walked among His people.

Then John heard a voice from the throne promising that God Himself would dwell among men. He would wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there would be no more death. The prophets spoke of this time in fairly consistent terms. Isaiah 25:6-9 promised that God would reign on the mountain and would remove the veil from the gentiles' minds. He would swallow up death for all time, and He would wipe away all tears from the eyes of His people. Ezekiel 48:35 said that the New Jerusalem's name would

be "The Lord is there." Zephaniah 3:15-17 promised that the King of Israel, the Lord, would dwell in Jerusalem. He would love His people and would exalt over them with joy. Zechariah 2:10-12 promised that the Lord would dwell in Zion. Many nations would join themselves to the Lord and become His people. Then the Lord would possess Judah and again choose Jerusalem. These and other prophecies were carried over into Revelation almost unchanged. John repeated them in Revelation 3:4; 3:12; 7:15-17; 14:4-5, and chapters 21 and 22.

Verses 5-8

Revelation 21:5-8 included a divine commentary on the vision of history recorded in Revelation 20-21. Sin had been judged and saints had inherited the kingdom. Then Christ made a royal declaration from His throne that summed up all of history. Christ said, "It is finished." The drama of history had played out. Finally, everything had been subjected to Christ. Now Christ summed up all things in Himself. He was the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Paul wrote in Romans 11:36 that from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things. In I Corinthians 15:28, Paul promised that when everything was subjected to Christ, the Son Himself would be subjected to the Father, that God may be all and in all. After the judgment, the kingdom of the earth would become the kingdom of our Lord. Christ would fill all things and reign forever. Then He would give to those who thirst from the well spring of His life.

Revelation 21:7 promised that those who overcame would inherit these things. This theme of inheritance ran through Scripture. Isaiah 57:13 promised, "He who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land. He will possess My holy mountain." Isaiah 65:9 made a similar statement. In Matthew 25:34, Jesus promised, "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come you who are blessed of My father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the earth.'" Christ was saying that His children would be given their inheritance in its final form when He returned. Matthew 25 suggested that this inheritance followed the final judgment. Believers had already become sons of God as heirs of His promise. When Christ returned, His children would receive their sonship and their inheritance in Him. Christ also warned that when He returned, unbelievers would receive their inheritance as well. They were heirs to the lake of fire and brimstone that was the second death.

Verses 9-27

The rest of Revelation 21 and the first five verses of Revelation 22 were a vision of the New Jerusalem. This section fulfilled Moses' promise in Exodus 15:17-18 that the Lord would plant Israel in the mountain of His inheritance, and the Lord would rule forever. The vision in Revelation 21 was shown to John by the angel with the bowl of wrath. In Revelation 21:9, this angel offered to give John a tour of the city. The vision that John now saw was similar to Ezekiel's description of the restored Jerusalem. Revelation 21:10 claimed that John was carried away in the spirit to a great and high mountain. There, he saw the holy city coming down from God in heaven. Ezekiel's vision began in nearly the same way (Ezekiel 40:2). John noted that the city was made up of something like crystal clear jasper. This resembled the material that was associated with God's throne in other passages (Revelation 4:6; Ezekiel 1:22, and Exodus 24:10)

John saw the holy city sitting on a great and high mountain. This was Mount Zion, God's holy mountain. Several prophecies promised that there would be a great earthquake when Christ returned. Then every mountain would be brought low. Every valley would be raised up to form a plain. However, Jerusalem would rise on its site and become a great mountain. This could refer to a physical mountain, to Christ's kingdom, or possibly to both at the same time. Daniel 2:35 recorded part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The stone cut out without hands in his dream became a great mountain. Daniel 2:44 interpreted this mountain as God's kingdom which would be set up during the period of the mixed nations. This kingdom would destroy man's empire, and it would endure forever. Other prophecies seemed to be saying

that Mount Zion would be a high physical mountain. Zechariah 14:10 promised that the land would be changed into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem. However, Jerusalem would rise and remain on its place from Benjamin's gate to the First Gate and the Corner Gate, from the Tower of Hananel to the king's wine presses. The amount of detail in this prophecy was more consistent with a physical mountain than just a symbol for Christ's kingdom. There are also more prophecies that could be taken either way. Isaiah 2:2-4 promised that nations would stream to the holy mountain of God. This could mean that gentiles would be converted and would join the kingdom. It could also mean that nations would worship Christ on His holy mountain.

The city that John saw was square with three gates on each side. It resembles in some ways the lay out of the wilderness community. Each gate was guarded by an angel named after one of Israel's tribes. These angels might resemble the angels of the churches in Revelation 2-3. The city wall also had twelve foundation stones which were named after the twelve apostles. In Ezekiel's vision, the city was also square with three gates on each side (Ezekiel 48:30-34). These gates also contained the names of Israel's twelve tribes. Both John and Ezekiel stressed the importance of Israel's tribes. John added that the church was also founded on the apostles.

The descriptions of Jerusalem present a problem. How much of John and Ezekiel's vision should be interpreted as a description of a future city and how much should be taken as a symbolic message. The two visions were not completely compatible, and John's vision also seemed to contradict Zechariah 2:1-5. Zechariah saw an angel with a measuring line who was sent out to measure Jerusalem. Zechariah then saw another angel who said, "Run, speak to that young man. Tell him that Jerusalem would be inhabited without walls because of the abundance of men and cattle in it. For I, declared the Lord, will be a wall of fire around her and the glory in her midst." Zechariah also seemed to be talking about the New Jerusalem which would be covered with the cloud and fire that had led Israel through the wilderness. It would also be so filled with God's radiance that the city would have no need for the sun. Why would Zechariah say that the city would have no walls when both John and Ezekiel described the walls in detail. All three visions are symbolic to some degree, and it is difficult to determine the physical reality that they may symbolize.

Another problem to consider is that John's city was far larger than Ezekiel's city. In Ezekiel, the New Jerusalem was a little over a mile on each side. It could fit rather comfortably on the top of a mountain (Ezekiel 48:33-35). In Revelation, the city was 1,500 miles long, wide, and high. This is probably just a symbolic description. A city that large would not fit easily on a mountain top. Also, although God can do anything, it would be unusual for Him to make a city wall 1,500 miles high. Such a city would stretch very far into space. The whole diameter of the earth is only 7,000 miles. John described Jerusalem's walls with symbols that were drawn from Revelation 7 and 14. The 1,500 mile was literally 12,000 stadia, and one stadia equaled 600 feet. The number 12,000 was the same number used in Revelation 7 to describe the sealed Old Testament community when 12,000 people were sealed from each of Israel's 12 tribes (except Dan). The city wall in Revelation 21 was also 72 yards wide, or 144 cubits. The number 144 also reflected Revelation 7 and 14. Perhaps the dimensions of the city wall signified symbolically that all of God's people were there. This imagery could be compared perhaps to Peter's claim in I Peter 2:5 that believers were living stones in God's house.

Jerusalem's foundation stones were adorned with jewels. Each stone was decorated with a different jewel. These jewels were reminiscent of Exodus 39:8-14 where Aaron wore a breastplate with 12 jewels on it. Each jewel represented one of Israel's tribes. So Jerusalem's foundation stones were associated with both the 12 apostles and the 12 tribes. The jewels might have been a fulfillment of Isaiah 54:11-13 which claimed, "Oh afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted. Behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and I will lay your foundations in sapphires. I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of crystal, and your wall of precious stones. All of your sons will be taught of the Lord." Isaiah promised that the whole city wall would be built of jewels. John only said that the foundation stones would be decorated with jewels. The symbolic descriptions are similar and related, but not identical. A similar claim from the

Pauline corpus can be seen in Ephesians 2:20. Paul claimed that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

The next problem in Revelation 21 comes from Revelation 21:22. John said, "I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its temple." The idea that God was the temple may have come from Ezekiel 11:16. This verse promised that God would be Israel's sanctuary while they were in captivity. Will there actually be a temple in the New Jerusalem? Some verses say yes while others say no. Revelation 3:12 noted that he who overcame would be a pillar in God's temple. If Christ's temple was His people, it was not a building. The Old Testament community would also be a part of Christ's temple. Psalm 114:2 promised, "Judah became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion." Paul built on this theme in Ephesians 2:19-22. He wrote, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints. You are God's household having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus Himself is the cornerstone in whom the whole building is fit together into a holy temple of God in the Spirit." So Christ's church is sometimes described as a temple. Christ is called the cornerstone of this temple in other passages as well (I Peter 2:6; Luke 20:17-18). Other passages seem to suggest that there will be a temple in the New Earth. Ezekiel 37:28 promised that when God lived with His people, God's sanctuary would be in their midst forever. Ezekiel's vision in Ezekiel 40-48 began with a long and detailed description of this temple. Joel 3:18-21 described the New Earth after Armageddon. Joel said that a spring would go out of God's house to water the valley of Shittim. This spring would be the same river seen in Ezekiel 47 where it came out of the temple. Zechariah 14:21 added that there would be no Canaanite in God's house in the new earth. So the prophets often suggested a physical temple.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the existence of a temple may come from descriptions of Christ's throne. The Old Testament described this cherubim throne in terms that seemed to suggest that it actually existed. Matthew 26:64 promised that Christ would return to earth sitting on this throne. If Christ's throne existed, it would have to be somewhere. A temple would seem the likely place since the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies represented it (I Chronicles 28:18). One solution to the temple problem would be to arbitrarily assign prophecies that talked about a physical temple to the millennial age and prophecies that assumed no temple to the New Earth. However, it is a little questionable whether this solution can work with all of the related passages.

The rest of Revelation 21 summarized several prophecies about Christ's return and reign. Although the things contained in these verses are spoken by various prophets, the one place where they all come together is Isaiah 60. This chapter may have been the primary source for Revelation 21:23-27. John said in Revelation 21:23 that Jerusalem would have no need for the sun and moon because God's glory would illumine it and the Lamb would be its light. Isaiah promised in Isaiah 60:19-20, "No longer will you have the sun for light by day, nor for brightness will the moon give you light. You will have the Lord for an everlasting light, and your God for your glory. Your sun will set no more, neither will your moon wane. For you will have the Lord for an everlasting light, and the days of your mourning will be finished." John added in Revelation 21:25 that Jerusalem's gates would never be closed because there would be no night there. Isaiah 60:11 repeated this thought. (See also Isaiah 4:5; 24:23; Ezekiel 43:2; Zechariah 2:5.) Jerusalem's open gates may be the final fulfillment of Christ's promise in Revelation 3:8. Christ put an open door before His people which no one could shut because they had not denied His name.

In Revelation 21:24, John said that the nations would walk by Jerusalem's light. This may have meant that all peoples of the earth would believe. Isaiah expressed the same thought in Isaiah 60:3, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." Isaiah 60:12 added that the nations which did not serve Israel would perish (see also Jeremiah 3:17; Zephaniah 3:9) John also promised in Revelation 21:27 that no unbeliever would ever again enter Jerusalem, but only those whose names were written in the Lamb's book of life. Isaiah made a similar point in Isaiah 60:21. Isaiah wrote, "Then all your people will be righteous. They will possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified." (See also Jeremiah 31:34.)

Man's empire had streamed to the beast. Revelation 18 claimed that Babylon contained cargoes from all over the world. Jeremiah 51:44 promised that God would destroy Babylon and the nations would no longer stream to it. In Revelation 21, man's empire had become the kingdom of God. Now nations would stream to God's holy mountain as they had once streamed to Babylon. John promised in Revelation 21:24-26 that the nations would bring their glory and honor into Jerusalem. Isaiah made similar promises. Isaiah 60:5 claimed that the abundance of the sea would be turned to Israel, and the nation's wealth would come into her. Isaiah 60:11 claimed that Jerusalem's gates would always be open so that men could bring the wealth of nations into her. Isaiah 60:13 added that the glory of Lebanon would come to Israel to beautify the temple. (See also Micah 4:13; Zechariah 14:14; Haggai 2:6-7.)