

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

Rodger Dalman

CHAPTER 22: CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Verses 1-5

Revelation 22:1-5 finished the vision that John saw in Revelation 21. The first two verses described a river flowing from God's throne. This river presented the same kind of problems found in chapter 21. Will there actually be a river in the New Jerusalem, or is this just a symbol? In some verses, the idea of a river is clearly symbolic. In Jeremiah 2:13, God condemned Jerusalem saying, "My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, to hew for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water." In contrast, Jeremiah 12:3 promised that they would one day draw water from the springs of salvation. Isaiah 59:19 used the water symbol in the same way. Isaiah wrote, "So they will fear the name of the Lord from the west and His glory from the rising of the sun. For He will come like a rushing stream which the wind of the Lord drives." Christ was compared to a river flowing out by the Spirit to convert the nations. Jesus made the same kind of statement in John 7:37-39. Jesus said, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.' This He spoke of the Spirit whom those who believed were to receive." If these prophecies are used to interpret Revelation 22, the river of the water of life should be Christ's Spirit flowing out to heal the nations.

The symbol of a river is also used in the Old Testament to describe Israel's well being. This symbol is especially common in Isaiah. In Isaiah 48:18, God told His people, "If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river and your righteousness like the waves of the sea." Isaiah also promised that one day, Christ's people would obey Him. In Isaiah 66:12, the prophet wrote, "For thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I extend peace to her like a river and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.'" Clearly, the New Jerusalem would have peace like an overflowing stream.

In contrast, other prophecies seemed to imply that there would be a physical river flowing from Jerusalem. This was even true in Isaiah 33:20-21 where the prophet described the New Jerusalem this way. "Look upon Zion, the city of our appointed feasts. Your eyes shall see Jerusalem as an undisturbed habitation, and tent which shall not be folded. Its stakes will never be pulled up nor any of its cords torn apart. There the majestic One, the Lord, will be for us. It will be a place of rivers and wide canals on which no boat with oars shall go, and on which no mighty ship will pass." Isaiah seemed to say that Jerusalem would contain rivers and canals.

Other prophecies also implied that there would be a physical river flowing from Jerusalem. Zechariah 14:1-7 described in accurate terms Armageddon and Christ's return. Then Zechariah 14:8 promised that living water would flow out of Jerusalem. Half of the water would flow toward the eastern sea and half toward the western sea. If the first seven verses of Zechariah 14 should be taken in a more or less literal way, the next verse probably should be taken as a literal description as well. Joel 3:18-21 also described Christ's reign on earth in fairly literal terms. This prophet added that a spring would go out of the Lord's house to water the valley of Shittim (or the Dead Sea). There must be some connection between Joel's prophecy and Revelation 22:1. This theme can also be seen in Psalm 46 which seemed to describe Christ's kingdom. Psalm 46:4 noted, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High." Ezekiel described the New Jerusalem in substantial detail. Half of Ezekiel 47 described a river which would flow into the sea. It would make the sea fresh and full of fish. This promise contrasted sharply with the first two Woes that killed much of the life in the sea (Revelation 8:9; 16:3). If Christ renewed the planet, a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy might fit well into history. Ezekiel went on to describe areas that would be fished and areas that would remain salty. This type of prophecy usually had a literal fulfillment. So some prophecies of the river of life seem to describe the Holy Spirit's work within people while other prophecies sound more like a description of a historical event.

Finally, some prophecies could be taken either way. Isaiah combined the river symbol with deliverance in Isaiah 41:17-20. Isaiah wrote, "The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none. Their tongue is parched with thirst. I, the Lord, will answer them Myself. As the God of Israel, I will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights and springs in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land fountains of water." The afflicted were seeking for water, so God gave it to them. Why did He do so? Isaiah 41:20 explained, "That they may see, recognize, consider, and gain insight that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it." God will provide water so that people will know that He was the One who gave it to them. However, is their thirst physical or spiritual? Is the water that God provides the gospel, a physical river, or both? The same difficulty can be seen in Daniel 7:10. Daniel described God's throne. He added that "A river of fire was flowing, and it came out before Him." If Christ's throne is not just a metaphor but actually exists, is there a river of fire or water flowing from it? Was the river of fire a symbol for judgment, glory, or both? How was it related to the river of the water of life which also flowed from God's throne? Are they the same river? The New Jerusalem would be composed of something that looked like glowing metal or fire. If the river of life was composed of a similar substance, could it burn like fire? The questions are impossible to answer with any certainty.

On either side of the river of life, John saw growing the trees of life. These trees bore twelve kinds of fruit and yielded their fruit every month. The trees' leaves were for the healing of the nations. This prophecy is also difficult to understand. Scripture sometimes used trees to symbolize people. Jeremiah 17:7-8 promised that those who trusted God would be like a tree planted by the water which would always yield its fruit. Isaiah compared God's faithful remnant to the trunk of a fallen tree (Isaiah 6:13; 37:31). Paul used the tree symbol in Romans 11:17-24. The root in Romans 11:17 was the tradition of faith. It may have been related to the Tree of Life. Jews were branches that were broken off for their unbelief. Gentiles were grafted in to replace the Jews. The gentiles would remain a part of the tree as long as they believed. Romans 11:24 promised that the Jewish nation would be grafted back into the tree when the nation returned to belief (cf. John 15:1-2). So the tree of life may be the tradition of faith which Paul described in Romans 11. The twelve kinds of fruit born by the trees would be related to the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles (cf. II Kings 19:30-31). The tree of faith would naturally grow on either side of the outpoured Holy Spirit.

Some prophecies also sounded like the Tree of Life was not a symbol but a real plant. In Genesis 3:22, God drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden so that they would not eat from the Tree of Life. Adam's membership in Christ's church would not have been affected one way or another by his eviction from Eden. Adam's exile meant that he could not eat from this physical tree, so he died. Christ could easily be talking about the same kind of tree in Revelation 2:7. He said, "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the Tree of Life which is in the Paradise of God." The trees that John saw were also described in Ezekiel 47:7-12. Ezekiel saw many trees of all kinds in the river bank. Their leaves did not wither, and their fruit did not fail. They bore every month because their water flowed from the sanctuary. Their fruit was for food, and their leaves were for healing. Here again, John and Ezekiel saw nearly the same vision. However, John saw the Tree of Life while Ezekiel just saw a variety of fruit trees. Perhaps Ezekiel described something closer to what may actually exist while John combined Ezekiel's vision with a symbol for spiritual life.

Revelation 22:3-5 are less difficult. There will no longer be any curse because Christ has already judged sin. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city because Christ has returned on His throne and has begun to reign. Christ's bondservants will serve Him. They will see His face because His is now physically present among His people. Christ's name will be on their foreheads as a symbol that the kingdom has come and that Jesus has sealed His children with the Spirit. There will no longer be any night because Christ's glory will fill Jerusalem. Even the city's buildings will be radiant. Christ will also place over Jerusalem the pillar of cloud and fire that covered Israel in the wilderness (cf. Psalm 105:39). Then Christ's people will reign with Him on earth forever. The cloud of fire will remain over Jerusalem

because God has led His people home. Throughout Revelation, John pointed people beyond the terrible destruction to the kingdom. It is this vision of deliverance that made Christ's children rejoice when they saw the judgment. Indescribable suffering and terror were coming on the world, but Christ's children must not be afraid. These things are signs that Jesus is about to return. Christ told His people, "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among the nations forever because of the roaring of the sea and waves. Men will faint with fear because of the things that are about to come onto the world because the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to happen, straighten up. Lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:25-28). Babylon will be destroyed by fire. The Antichrist will murder God's children. Armageddon will decimate the earth, but Christ tells His children not to be afraid. When these things begin, their redemption is near.

Verses 6-9

Since Revelation 21:9, John had been seeing a vision shown to him by an angel who had one of the seven bowls of wrath. This angel closed his part of the vision by telling John the faithful and true words of God. Through the rest of Revelation 22, this angel told Christ's words to John. Christ's words were first a repetition of Revelation 1:1, "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show His bondservants the things that must shortly take place." Then Christ said through this angel, Behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book." John was overwhelmed and he began to worship the angel who was telling him Christ's words. The angel said, "Do not do this. I am a fellow servant of yours, of your brethren the prophets, and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God." This angel was not Christ, and he would not accept worship.

Verses 10-21

The rest of Revelation 22 contained Christ's words spoken by this angel. John was told not to seal up the words of this book for the time was near. This contrasted with Daniel who was told to conceal his vision until the end times. Daniel was told that his vision pertained to a time far in the future (Daniel 8:26; 12:4). John was told that the time was at hand. When prophecy was unsealed and understood, the time for its fulfillment would come.

Christ continued the theme of His imminent return in Revelation 22:11. The Lord said, "Let the one who does wrong still do wrong. Let the one who is filthy still be filthy. Let the one who is righteous still be righteous. Let the one who is holy still be holy." These words stressed the certainty and immediacy of judgment. God made the same type of command through the Old Testament prophets just before His people were carried into captivity. God said to Ezekiel, "He who hears, let him hear. He who refuses, let him refuse. For they are a rebellious house" (Ezekiel 3:27). Zechariah said, "I will not pasture you. What is to die let it die. What is to be annihilated let it be annihilated, and let those who are left each one another's flesh." Amos 4 stressed the same theme with the words, "Enter Bethel and transgress. Multiply transgression in Gilgal ... for you love to do so, sons of Israel." Then God said that He had been chastening them, and He was about to destroy Israel because they refused to repent. When God commanded that someone be left alone, it was so that His judgment would come. In Revelation 22, Christ was saying that the time for His return was at hand. So let those who have ears to hear should continue in their faith. Why would this happen? Christ said, "Behold, I am coming quickly. My reward is with Me to render to every man according to what he has done.

Revelation 22:13-15 gave the same kind of summary found in Revelation 21:6-8. Christ again described Himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The Lord returned, and He would now subject all things to Himself. When He came, Christ promised that those who washed their robes in his blood, and who made them white in His righteousness, would have the right to the tree of life. They

could enter the city gates. In Matthew 8:12, Christ also warned that everyone who continued their rebellion would remain outside of the city. These would be cast into outer darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In Revelation 22:16, Christ ended John's vision as He had begun it in Revelation 1:1. He said, "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.

Revelation 22:17 read, "The Spirit and the bride say 'Come!' Let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who wishes to take the water of life without cost." This verse sums up all prophecy. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" As the seventh seal was broken in Revelation 6:3, the cherubim before God called, "Come!" In Matthew 6:10, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Father, ... Your kingdom come!" As Revelation begins to be understood, Christ's children will face severe persecution. Yet Jesus said in Luke 21:28, "Lift up your heads. Your redemption is drawing near." All of prophecy was an anxious looking forward to Christ's return. So Christ's children must not fear suffering. They must fix their eyes on their Lord and say, "Thy kingdom come," and "Come, Lord Jesus."

God also said through all of the prophets, "Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." From the day that God sought out Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Lord has been calling people to Himself. All of the prophets cried out for people to repent and return to God. In Isaiah 1:18-20, the prophet wrote, "Come now, let us reason together," "though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land. If you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." Isaiah said, come and repent! God will forgive you and give you all of the blessings that He has promised for His. If you continue to rebel, God will destroy you. The Bible says, "Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Psalm 95:7-8)

Then Christ solemnly warned that if anyone added anything to what God had said, God would add to him all of the plagues written in the book. Those plagues were the destruction of this world and eternal hell. If anyone refused to believe anything that God had said and tried to take away from God's words, God would take away his part in the city of God and in the tree of life. Jesus who testified to these things said, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Then John concluded, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.