

28 May, 2000
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FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD: NEW JERUSALEM

“Saving Private Ryan” was maybe the most gut-wrenching movie I have ever seen. I have seen scarier movies and gorier movies. But I don’t recall a movie that had me more emotionally engaged. The opening scene of the invasion on D-Day was perhaps the most powerful bit of filmmaking ever done. And I am quite sure, as horrific as those scenes were for all of us, it was the veterans who have been under fire in combat, those men who were the first to hit the beaches of Normandy, those men and women who walked through the jungles of Vietnam; who really were touched by what they saw. They didn’t have to use their imagination. They had been there.

Perhaps you same veterans, whose fallen colleagues we honor today, will find it easier to understand last week’s text and appreciate this week’s passage. Last week, it was the final battle. Jesus, the hero on the white horse, has appeared with his legions of heavenly soldiers following close behind. Satan, the dragon, and his evil henchmen, the Sea Beast and the Land Beast, have done their best to rally humanity against the one true king. But in the end, our hero dominated...no, he decimated his enemies.

This week, the battle is over. The fighting is done. The war that is TRULY the war to end all wars is completed. And all who are battle scarred and weary discover an incredible place of peace, safety and comfort. Does that sound good?

How many of you have ever tried to imagine what heaven will be like? I have. Now, here’s a chance to be really honest. How many of you have had a hard time getting excited about going there? Not because you don’t want to be with the Lord. All of us who love Christ look forward to that. No, it’s hard for many of us to get excited about living in a place of clouds and harps because we were not created for clouds and harps. We were created for dirt and trees, mountains and rivers, blue skies and forests and deserts. We were created to look up at clouds, not to sit upon them.

God created this earth specifically for us. Radical environmentalists will tell you differently. We are just a part of this creation, no better, no worse. That is not what scripture reveals. The Bible tells us that this wonderful earth, this glorious creation, is the setting in which God places the jewel of his creation: us!

The early chapters of Genesis tell of that first creation which the Bible calls the Garden of Eden. It tells us that God had a brainstorm. He decided to create a universe. And we watch in amazement as each creative act unfolds, culminating in the creation of man as male and female. When did that occur, according to Genesis 1.1? In the beginning.

In this morning’s text we come to the end. The end of human time as we know it. And what do we discover? It is not the end after all. It is the beginning. Again. A new beginning. Chapter 21 is one of the most beautiful visions in all of scripture. It looks ahead to a new day, a new creation. Actually, it looks ahead to a new re-creation.

Notice Revelation 21:5. Do you see anything unusual about it? First of all, who is speaking? The one on the throne: God. Why is that unusual? Because, in all of the 20 chapters of Revelation that we have studied, this is the first time the God, that enthroned one, has spoken since way back in 1:8. There he declared: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Then he remains silent. Throughout the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls – he says nothing. He only watches what is unfolding before him.

But finally, God speaks: “I am making everything new!” Note this: he does not say, “I am making all new things.” No, he is clearly re-making everything to be new. It is a re-creation. It is the earth and the heavens as they were intended to be from the beginning, before sin fouled and tainted it. So, when we look at this vision, we are catching a glimpse of the glorious creation that God intended from the very beginning. And we are catching a glimpse of our eternal future...not sitting atop some clouds in the heaven. No, a future spent in a gloriously restored earthly paradise.

But this new paradise, to our surprise, is not a garden is it? How does John describe it? As a city. As a New Jerusalem. Now, don’t be confused. This is not the Jerusalem in Palestine. As we will see, it has nothing in common with it. But it IS Jerusalem in the sense that this is where God meets humanity – Just as God once did in the old Jerusalem. In the temple, yes. But more important, on a hill called Calvary outside

the old city gates. It is there that Jesus Christ brought humanity and the Father together once again.

Notice how this New Jerusalem comes into existence. Is it the work of a new Solomon who designs and builds it? Is it the handiwork of a modern day Nehemiah and his friends? No, this New Jerusalem comes to us prefabricated, right out of heaven. “I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” This New Jerusalem is entirely God’s work. We have nothing to do with it. It comes to us ready-made. But it is like no pre-fab house you have ever seen.

In a moment, we will talk about life in that New Jerusalem. But before we do, can’t we dwell just a moment on the description of this glorious city? As with the rest of Revelation, the description is symbolic. It will be overwhelming for us. Too much to take in. But let’s be overwhelmed, shall we?

First of all, it is huge. Do you remember back in chapter 11 when John was told to take a river reed as a measuring rod and measure the temple? This time, the job is too big. It isn’t John, but an angel who has the measuring rod...of gold, no less...and lays out the city gates and walls. The city is laid out in a square, the walls as long as they are wide. And how long are they? 12,000 stadia. Do you know how long that is? 1400 miles! 1400 miles square! 2,250,000 square miles! A city that stretches roughly halfway across the United States.

But that’s not all. Not only are the walls 1,400 miles long and 1,400 miles wide...what does verse 16 tell us? They are 1,400 miles TALL too! It is a perfect cube. A 1,400 mile cube. Now we might find this very impressive, but we will miss the meaning that the first-century Jew would immediately have picked up on. What other structure was built as a perfect cube? As tall and long as it was wide? The inner sanctuary. The Holy of Holies. What took place in the Holy of Holies? That was where God met with the High Priest once a year. It was believed to be the dwelling place of God. Are you beginning to grasp what this imagery would have been communicating to those first-century Jews? And to us?

Let’s continue. What is the building material? Concrete? Steel? Nothing so mundane. The walls and city are built of pure gold...gold so pure you can see through it ...and of a beautiful green stone, Jasper. Main Street, too, is paved with more of that transparent gold.

When we pour a foundation for a home, it is concrete and rebar. Nothing much to look at. But who cares? It will be covered up. But even the foundation of New Jerusalem is too beautiful for words. The first foundation is green jasper, the second, blue sapphire and so on. Chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, topaz....the most beautiful stones in the world. Each of them would have been lovely as a one-carat bauble around our beloveds neck. But God builds his New Jerusalem with them. Nothing but the best.

And for the gates...the portals to this glorious New Jerusalem, the most precious of all gems and stones. Twelve pearls. The gatehouses are always larger than the wall itself. And in John's vision, each gate is made out of one gigantic pearl...a pearl of great price, perhaps?

How is your imagination doing? Can you picture it? Even a hint of it? Well, as glorious as the city itself is, you ain't seen nothin' yet. What is the most noteworthy quality of this New Jerusalem? Let me give you a hint. With all of this beautiful New Jerusalem, its splendid walls, glorious gates, breathtaking streets...there is something missing. What is it? Verse 22: "I did not see a temple in the city." How can you have a new, reconstructed Jerusalem with no temple? Ahhh...but it DOES have a temple. It is just not a building. What does it say? "The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." Wow! That's why the whole city was built in a cube...like the Holy of Holies...because God, himself was going to take up residence. They wouldn't need a special building in which to meet him. They could meet him on the street. Meet him in the parks. Walk alongside the river of life with him.

Glory! It's back to Eden again. When God walked in the garden with his beloved children. Remember what God told Moses when he wanted to look upon him? What would happen to any man who looked upon the face of God? He would die. It was too much. Too glorious. But that was when we had those old broken down human bodies. Now all things have been made new. Now, we have our new resurrection bodies. New resurrection eyes. And we can take it. WE can look upon the face of God and take it.

Not that it isn't bright. In fact, there's something else missing in this New Jerusalem. Did you notice what it is? The sun. The moon. But who needs them? We have a new source of light. The glory of God himself. Listen to this: "The Lamb is its lamp!" When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," we understood it as a metaphor. But not in New Jerusalem. He means it literally. The whole city...all 2,250,000 square miles of it is lit up by the radiant glory of God and the Lamb.

These are among the most wondrous texts we will ever read. Now, do you want to hear what I consider to be the most tender? Verse 3ff: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**" Can you imagine that? God himself, wiping away our tears. Tears never to return. Because all of the things that have ever made us sad on this earth will disappear. Remember, God is making all things new. No more death. How can there be? Look back in 20:14: Death and Hades have been destroyed...thrown into the Lake of fire.

No more cancer, no more molested children, no more war, no more swollen-bellied babies. No more broken marriages, no more broken hearts. No more horrific headlines to greet us at the breakfast table. No more abortion, no more gang violence. No more dishonest politicians, no more nuclear madness. No more guns, no more slaps, no more hurtful words. And no more Memorial Days. Everything we will want to remember...everyone we will want to remember will be standing right there beside us.

Every Memorial Day, we have a bugler play taps, the universal signal that the day is over. It is the commemoration of the fact that, for all those who have fallen, their day on earth is over. I am reminded of a story I heard from my friend, Jim Singleton. Until the funeral of Princess Diana, the last big funeral in England was that of Winston Churchill in 1965. Before Churchill died, he planned his own funeral service, which took place in St. Paul's Cathedral. He used the eloquent Anglican liturgy and included many great hymns of the church. At the end of the service, Churchill had stipulated that a bugler be positioned high in the dome of St. Paul's, and that the bugler play "Taps," the universal signal that the day is over, the end has come. But immediately after that came a dramatic turn - as Churchill had instructed, after Taps was finished another bugler, placed on the other side of the dome, played the notes of "Reveille" - "It's time to get up, It's time to get up. It's time to get up in the morning."

For most of us, our focus is on this life. As we plan our lives, we look ahead and hope for 80 years perhaps. More than that and we feel like we've received a bonus. But every one of us sitting here this morning...one day...will breathe our last. Our day will be done. Now...if this life is all there is, then that last breath...the playing of Taps...is a sorrowful occasion indeed. But if, as this great book promises, there is something more...something glorious waiting for us and for all who have loved Jesus...a New Jerusalem...well then, what a glorious hope!

Death isn't the ending. It is the beginning of an eternity spent with God - face to face. Imagine that! No more death. No more tears. No more pain. For the old things have passed away. What glory that will be.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR NEW JERUSALEM *Revelation 21*

28 May, 2000

Pastor Mark Toone

- *The Biblical material always speaks of our eternity being spent in a "new earth." How does this jibe with your own view of eternity? If it is true, that God will join us in an entirely restored universe, do you find that encouraging or disappointing. Why?*
- *First, read through the text and find all of the things that WON'T be in the New Jerusalem. You should find at least seven. What do they represent?*
- *Now, do the same and look for the things that WILL be in the New Jerusalem.*
- *Which one promise about New Jerusalem do you find most comforting? Why?*
- **Pray together.**

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