

Living in His Light

Acts 16:9-15 | Psalm 67 | Revelation 21:10, 21:22 – 22:5 | John 5:1-9

REVELATION 21:10, 21:22 – 22:5

¹⁰ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. ... ²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. ¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

INTRODUCTION

The *Psychological Review* is arguably the premiere peer-reviewed academic journal of psychology, established in 1894. It was here in 1943 that Abraham Maslow, professor of psychology at Brooklyn University, published what would become a massively influential paper called “A Theory of Human Motivation.”¹ In this paper, he developed a 5-part hierarchy of human needs, often called—rather creatively—‘Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs.’ The wide base of this pyramid-shaped hierarchy addresses physiological needs, things like food, water, warmth, shelter, light, sleep, hygiene, etc.—first order things that must be obtained before other higher order needs like security and love and self-understanding. You probably learned something like this in elementary school as the basic needs to sustain human life, usually consisting of food, water, shelter, and rest. And, in the 80 or so years since this article was published, this part of the hierarchy remains, confirmed over and over again by human experience. Humans need relatively little to survive. The Beatles were slightly misguided when they told us all we need is love.² It turns our food and water and shelter are fairly important. But as we live in a world where many strain to meet these simple, basic needs, a world that is not so simple, a world full of people struggling at the most basic levels, it is easy to lose sight of what could be, of what might be, once the struggle is passed. That is, it is far too easy in our world to be a pessimist.

As we turn to our reading from Revelation, we find a vision, seen by John, a glorious picture of the new heaven and the new earth, a picture of what will be when the end has come. And this picture, painted here in primarily two forms—a temple and a city—not only represents the glorious future of God’s people, but the fulfilment of God’s past promises, and a reason to hope when our gritty, dark, present world feels far from it. And my hope is this: that we all become

¹ A.H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1943), 370–396.

² John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “All You Need Is Love,” *All You Need Is Love* (1967).

hopeful, that we all come to desire being a part of this new heaven and new earth, worshipping God in the light for all eternity. Let's take a closer look.

1. A TEMPLE

The passage divides nicely into two sections, with the first part, Revelation 21:22-27, describing heaven—that is the state of being one might face after death, not so much a place, but a state of reality comprising of a new heaven and a new earth—describing heaven in familiar terms.³ Note the first thing John sees in this vision—or doesn't see. "*I saw no temple in the city.*"⁴ Speaking of the new Jerusalem, again, not a place but a way of describing the new reality—John sees no temple. This is striking, shocking even. For the Jews, the Temple was everything. From the days of Moses and the tabernacle, it was the place of meeting God.⁵ From the days of David and Solomon, it was the place where God resided.⁶ From the days of the prophet Ezekiel, it was promised that a temple would be reconstructed in Jerusalem to reinstitute the sacrifices and so that the Spirit of God might return his glory and presence to his people.⁷ It remains a sacred desire of Jews today, that such a temple will be built. And so, it is rather surprising that no temple is seen in this vision of the new heaven and earth, until we read the rest of the sentence: "*for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*"⁸ God will be present with his people once again, directly. And it will be glorious. The light of God's glory will be so bright as to render the sun and moon useless and unnecessary. The most glorious nations and kings will bring their glory, paling in comparison to the glory already there. Night will cease to be, rest will be unnecessary. The sacrifices will also be unnecessary because atonement is no longer necessary—sin (described here as that which is unclean, false, abominable) will have ceased. What a picture. Imagine it. A glowing, shining, perfect and sinless reality in which the presence of God and his glory is the entirety of existence—not a house of the Lord, but a house who is the Lord. And that's just the first picture.

2. A GARDEN

A second picture emerges in the second section, Revelation 22:1-5. Here we see the throne of God, but it is pictured as the source of a river of the water of life, with the tree of life and its fruit, lining the river, absent of anything accursed. For those of you familiar with Genesis 2 and

³ People often get a little confused about the end times. But as we're in Revelation, an apocalyptic book that already feels a bit unapproachable, let me try to explain a little. In short, we live during the *church age*. We live at a moment in time where Christ has returned to heaven and the Holy Spirit has come (after Pentecost). It's a complicated time, sometimes called the *intermediate state* or the *already but not yet*, meaning we can have faith in the certainty of our salvation because Christ has already died for us on the cross and been resurrected, yet we have not yet arrived at the end. The church is growing and yet God's people are constantly encountering sin and the effects of sin. It's a complicated reality. But at some point, nobody knows when, Christ Jesus will return to earth—his second coming or advent—and a final judgment will be pronounced. The victory he won in the cross will be fully realised, coming to completion. At this point, God's people will not be carted off to heaven in a spaceship or anything like that, but rather God will remake heaven and earth—a new heaven and earth—what I'm calling the new reality. And this new heaven and earth, is a state of reality, not a place. So, when we talk about heaven and hell, meaning what we face after we die and the second coming of Christ has occurred, we are not talking about geographical locations, but states of being. Geographically speaking, heaven means the new heaven and new earth—the very state of being described here in our passage from Revelation 21 and 22.

⁴ Rev 21:22.

⁵ Exod 33:1 – 33:23.

⁶ 1 Chron 17:1-27.

⁷ Ezekiel 40-43. See especially Ezek 43:1-12.

⁸ Rev 21:22.

3, you will recall the Garden of Eden, that first place God dwelt with his creation, his people. It was paradise, a garden with a river and trees and life, where God and man lived together in perfection.⁹ Only, Adam and Eve sinned, rebelling against God and his word, and bringing the curse upon all humankind. And here, in Revelation, the new creation is imagined as a new Garden of Eden, a redeemed and perfected garden, where nothing accursed shall be found anymore. And those who are present will worship, seeing God's face as they have not since the original Garden of Eden. It is a place of healing, of abundant provision, and once again, never lacking in light as God will be its light. This is the eternal paradise seen—two pictures of a glorious reality to come, the fulfilment of God's promise to redeem in a new creation—a temple and a garden.

3. OUR WORLD

And it would be nice to finish here. But if we did, you might be tempted to write this passage off or write this sermon off as simply a fanciful picture of an unapproachable and improbable future, naïvely ignorant of the world we live in. And that's kind of true. Imagine with me for a moment. Imagine being given a beautiful house with a lush, extravagant garden, all your basic needs met. Water from a river. Food from the trees in the garden. Light and warmth from the sun. Shame and stress are completely unnecessary as sin does not exist. It would be an incredible way to live—unpretentious, beautiful, with all of Maslow's needs being met in extravagant simplicity. But then imagine turning your back on the sun and shunning its light. Then imagine one of your children kills the other in cold blood. Then another turns his back on you. You live long enough to see your grandchildren become drunks, liars, tyrants, and the like. Eventually the generations of your offspring become numerous, waging wars with each other, inventing new philosophies and religions that include defiling your very house and your precious garden. This is exactly what happened to Adam and Eve. In that first disobedience, they set all of humanity on a path toward rebellion against God. Each subsequent person being born with a sinful human nature, an unavoidable propensity to evil deeds, to rejecting God. In this sense, we are all born slaves, slaves to sin. And one need not look very hard to see the effects of this in our world—in the defilement of all that is good and beautiful about life.

We allow far too many people in our world to live in places without access to clean water. We allow far too many people to starve. We, ourselves, are filled with rage and take it out on others, taking advantage of others out of greed, violent and oppressive, covetous and selfish. We are dishonest. We take something beautiful from the garden, like marriage, and pervert it in various ways, failing to act toward one another with godly love, allowing our children to become what we are—sinners. Even in the church, we act with hubris, hypocrisy, and hurtful attitudes, heterodox and unjust and corrupt. We have taken God's beautiful paradise and his holy house, his garden and his temple, and we have made it something unredeemable. And it feels hopeless. It feels out of control. We cannot ever seem to act the way we want to, hurting our loved ones, constantly stressed or anxious about the challenges of this world, tired, tried, troubled.

And yet, here is God, painting a picture of an incredible future—a future that only he can make, a return to creation in a new creation that we, despite all our ingenuity and creativity and technology, have not been able to reconstruct. Imagine again the simplicity of it, our basic needs met: a river to provide water, a tree of life to provide food, and God himself providing light,

⁹ Gen 2:9-14.

warmth, and shelter as the temple of the new heaven and the new earth. Imagine an eternity in the presence of God himself, a reality so glorious as to be perfect.

Of course, you might be wondering how one can come to enjoy this future reality. To answer that question, we need to unpack a concept referenced about halfway through the passage: *the lamb's book of life*. “*But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*”¹⁰ This book is a register of those whom God has chosen to be with him for eternity. It's referenced frequently throughout the Scriptures, distinguishing those who will enjoy eternal life from those who will face judgment.¹¹ Importantly here, it is not just a book of life, but the lamb's book of life. The lamb, Jesus Christ, is the lamb who was slain—as we heard a few weeks ago in our reading from Revelation 5: “*...for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.*”¹² In other words, those who are in the book of life are there not by their own merit, but by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and only those will enjoy this glorious and heavenly future in the temple and garden of the new creation. And what does it take? It takes faith and repentance, belief in Christ Jesus.

And then, once you have believed, it is time to live in the light. Remember, God and Jesus are the light in the glorious future. But we need not wait until heaven to live in the light. As Jesus said in John's Gospel: “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*”¹³ I wish I had time to be even more specific here, to talk about what it looks like to live in the light, to follow Jesus, to be a person of faith and repentance, to be a person hopes in the glorious future promised here. But for now...

CONCLUSION

We may look forward to heaven in hope, longing for the peace and simple and beautiful reality it brings. But we can also begin now, worshipping our God and living in his light. As we sang just before our Gospel reading:

In Christ alone my hope is found,
he is my light, my strength, my song.¹⁴

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, recognizing that you have given us hope through the death and resurrection of your Son, give us hope in the glorious future of heaven, helping us to live now in the light of that hope. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁰ Rev 21:27.

¹¹ See also Exod 32:31-33, Psa 69:28, Isa 4:3, Dan 7:10, Phil 4:2-3, Rev 13:8, Rev 17:8, and Rev 20:12.

¹² See Rev 5:9. See also Rev 5:6.

¹³ John 8:12.

¹⁴ Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “In Christ Alone” (2001).