

WHAT'S AFTER ATX

EXEGETICAL NOTES:

THE HIGHLIGHT OF HEAVEN

A. Revelation 21:22-22:5

CONTEXT

Our passage comes at the very end of the story of Scripture, the book of Revelation. John has spent the past twenty chapters describing vision after vision, judgment after judgment, and now comes to the culmination of it all. Jesus returns to earth in chapter 19, and reigns in 20, and now in our chapter, the heavens and earth are remade into what God always intended creation to be.

John draws heavily from imagery throughout the Old Testament, but especially from Genesis. This is a kind of new beginning, a new Genesis. The world began in a garden; it begins again in a city. Michael Wilcock observes, “Instead of a garden only, there is now the developed structure of a garden city.”¹

After getting a guided tour of the New Jerusalem and describing the walls, the gates, the foundations, and its size, John moves to making general observations of what the city is like and what is in it. This description shows us the highlight of heaven—not the streets of gold, not the pearly gates, or even the freedom from pain and suffering, but God himself.

1. Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975), 212.

B. Revelation 21:22-27

OUR HEAVENLY TEMPLE

John notes two unusual features about the city. First is that there is no temple. This odd detail is pointed out by Craig Keener when he says, “The lack of a temple in the new Jerusalem contrasts starkly with the traditional Jewish expectations of the end time, in which a new temple was the central feature of the city.” He even says that Jews regularly prayed for a renewal of the temple.²

The temple was a major feature of Jerusalem since the days of King David, and even before that there was at least a portable tent that housed the presence of God. But in the New Jerusalem, John notes the notable absence of a tabernacle or temple.

He says that instead of a temple, God and the Lamb are the temple. In the old system, God had to be sectioned off by the tabernacle/temple because of man’s sin. And there wasn’t just the division of the structure itself that separated God, but there was a whole system of cleanliness rituals and priests that made it Sin kept man from fully enjoying the presence of God, and it separated him from God. But in the New Jerusalem, that will not be the case since the world will be remade.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

The second unusual feature that John notes is that there is no sun or moon. When God created the world, his first creation was light, and on the fourth day he created the sun, moon and stars. As important as those light sources are to all of life since the very beginning, they will not be needed as God and the Lamb are also the city’s sun and lamp.

One can’t help but be reminded about Jesus’ claim about himself that John wrote about in his gospel, that he is the “light of the world” (John 8:12). He claimed not to be a light to the Jews only, but to all nations. So, it makes sense that here we see all the nations walking by his light.

The Gentiles could not come even into the courtyard of the Temple—only the Jews could. And they certainly could not come into the presence of God—only the priest could. But God will be present in the city, the gates are always open, and people can come before God—even Gentiles can.

The Gentile nations were seen by the Jews as unclean, so for them to come into their new, pure city would be a concern. But John says that even with “outsiders” coming in, there would be nothing unclean; only those found in the Lamb’s book of life.

2. Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 485.

C. Revelation 21:25-22:2 The Fall Reversed & Creation Restored

FELLOWSHIP WITH MAN

Besides the division the Fall made between God and man, division was also created between men. After God confronted Adam for his sin, the first thing he did was blame Eve for his actions. This had a trickle-down effect to every person who has ever lived. If you've lived very long, you know the pain broken relationships can bring.

If you need any more evidence for broken relationships, just turn on the news. From political differences to violence, our world is divided. But when Jesus brings his kingdom, he will also bring peace between people. Even though the Gentiles were drastically different from the Jews (even in the church), all the nations stream into the New Jerusalem.

I already mentioned that nothing unclean would come into the city. This indicates a washing and cleansing of the stain of sin and the effect of the Fall. There would be no more sin to defile or divide.

THE WATER AND THE TREE OF LIFE

John observes that the focal point of the city is the throne of God and the Lamb, and flowing from it is the river of life. Also, in John's gospel, Jesus claimed to have the water of life (John 4:13-14), and that anyone who drinks from him will never be thirsty again. Here, in the New Jerusalem, the water of life runs as an ever-flowing river through the center of the city, free all who come.

On either side this river was a long-lost sight: the tree of life. Remember this tree? This is the same tree that was present in the garden of Eden along with the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When Adam and Eve ate from that second tree, they were barred from ever eating from the first tree again, being banished from the garden.

But when God makes all things new, the tree will be back, yielding twelve types of fruit. And after the centuries of pain that sin has caused, everyone will need a lot of healing, so its leaves will heal the nations.

D. Revelation 22:3-5 The Highlight of Heaven

GOD'S PRESENCE

John then reiterates a few things. He already said nothing unclean will enter the city, but he stresses the fact that again. All that would cause separation between God and man will be gone forever.

SEEING GOD FACE TO FACE

In the book of Exodus, Moses at one point asks to see God's glory. God agrees to this, but tells Moses, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." God actually has to place Moses into a cleft of a rock and put his hand over him to protect him from the blazing glory that would obliterate him.

Despite the danger of a sinful person wanting to see the face of God, many people throughout the Old Testament wanted it dearly for themselves and for others. This is because they understood seeing the face of God to be synonymous with his presence, and his presence to be a blessing.

Whenever the high priest would bless the Israelites, he would say, "May the Lord...make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you..." (Num. 6:25). To David, the Lord's face brought satisfaction (Ps. 17:15), blessing and vindication (Ps. 24:5-6), and for God to turn his face a way was judgment (Ps. 27:9). In the New Jerusalem we will enjoy the privilege of always being able to see God's face.

BEING GOD'S TREASURED POSSESSION

Not only will we see God, but we will be his treasured possession. Again, in the Old Testament, God took Israel as his treasured possession (Ex. 19:5). This was pictured especially in garments of the high priest. He had a plate inscribed with "Holy to the LORD" on it that was worn on his forehead. But this place of prominence was temporary, and only reserved for a chosen few.

Richard Bauckham, however, writes,

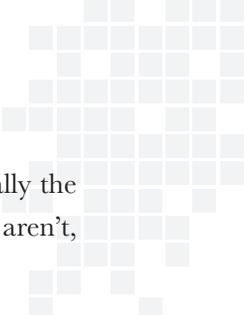
In the earthly temple in Jerusalem the high priest, once a year only, wore the sacred name of God on his forehead and entered God's immediate presence in the holy of holies. In the New Jerusalem, which is God's eternal holy of holies all will enjoy this immediacy without interruption.³

No longer will only a chosen few will be God's possession, but all will be, and they will enjoy God's presence forever. John also reiterates that there will be no need of lamp or light because God will be our light, and we will reign with him forever.

CONCLUSION

Gold and jewels and no pain sounds great, but the best part is that God will be there. Sometimes, when people talk about heaven, those things are all they talk about. No pain, seeing family again, a big mansion, and all-you-can eat ice cream without getting sick!

3. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 142.



But would you be content in heaven with all those things and God not be there? Is God and Jesus really the highlight of heaven for you? You are God's and Jesus' treasured possession, but are they yours? If they aren't, then heaven might not be as great as you think it will be.

If you honestly have a hard time thinking of God as the highlight, you aren't alone. We all struggle with finding pleasure in things other than God. Hour-long worship services can seem to drag sometimes, so an eternal one doesn't exactly sound great.

But the God who made you knows all of this. He knows your struggle with sin, and he can and will cleanse you of it if you repent and seek his help. And considering that God is perfect and infinite—even though it is hard for us to imagine—being in God's presence worshipping him forever will be the most delightful and soul-satisfying thing we will ever experience. No doubt we will delight in him forever.