

## Subject Line: Revelation Week Five

Mon: Rev. 18:1-24

Tues: Rev. 19:1-21

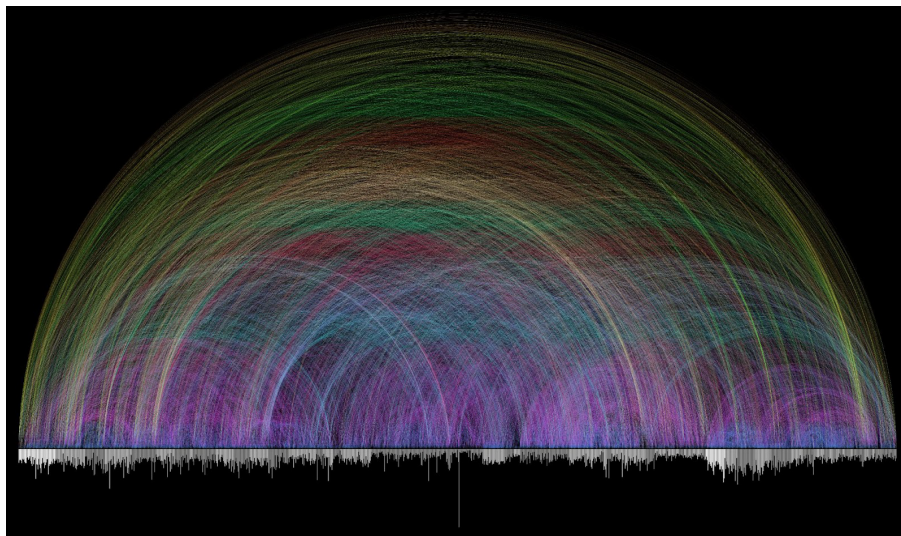
Wed: Rev. 20:1-15

Thur: Rev. 21:1-27

Fri: Rev. 22:1-21

Happy Sunday,

We've reached the final chapters in this incredible saga of heaven and earth reuniting. These last chapters are my favorite. They bring together threads that have been woven like a quilt from the first pages of the Bible, through the prophets and the wisdom literature, through the story of Jesus and the writings of the Apostles, all pointing forward to this moment, the epic conclusion!



Some of you may remember [this image that details the more than 63,000 places where the Bible links back to itself](#). The whole canon is a work of literary art, and Genesis and Revelation are the two bookends of that story. They are the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega. They detail all that went wrong with the world and all that God will do to make things right again.

The last two chapters of Revelation mark our return to the Garden, only it's no longer a Garden but a City! The Garden City represents the best of human ingenuity and creativity, the creators we were created to be living in the very presence of God for eternity. Heaven and Earth are reunited. We are reunited with God in His full glory, forever and ever.

This is the greatest story ever told. And it's *your* story! And the best part is, we don't have to wait to experience a taste of this story today. Every week we pray the Lord's prayer we participate in this grand narrative.

"May your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

We don't know when we'll get to live in the Revelation 21 and 22 reality. But our mission in the meantime is to do what we can to restore little pockets of heaven on earth. To make our homes, our workplaces, and our cities more like heaven in the here and now.

*On earth as it is in heaven.*

Let that be your rally cry. May we live in such a way that those around us get a taste of heaven. May Dallas, and all other cities we occupy, become more like the Garden City. And may we echo the words of the Spirit and the Bride, united as they were always supposed to be, as we ache for Jesus to invade this world with his love and mercy and might.

We shout, "Come Lord Jesus!" and hear his response in our very bones, "Surely I am coming soon."

*Amen. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with us all.*

Happy reading, friends!

## About the Reading

### Monday | Revelation 18:1-24

Before we can celebrate the coming of heaven and earth, Babylon must be dealt with. The Angel echoes the words from earlier in [ch. 14](#). And this is not the first time these words have been spoken in the Bible. The prophets [Isaiah and Jeremiah](#) both made similar proclamations against the "Babylons" of their day. In the Bible, Babylon became a title for any city or empire that brought out the worst of human intention and evil. In Revelation, we get a picture of what that looks like.

- She's lured people to worship anything and everything apart from God.
- She's a haven for all kinds of immorality and uncleanness.
- She's grown rich through greed and injustice.

And the worst part is God's people are not immune from her charms (Remember how John marveled at the harlot and the beast?).

A voice from heaven cries out in warning, "**Come out of her**, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues;"

We've said throughout Revelation that the image of sexual immorality is being used as a metaphor for idolatry. When God's people worship other gods, it's like they are cheating on their marriage partner ([Israel is called the bride of God](#)). The voice (presumably God) tells His people to "Come out of her." And that's exactly what He means. It's an explicit image, but that should tell us how serious this warning is. God doesn't want His people to share in the judgment of Babylon. And there is nothing God hates more than idolatry.

And look at how the judgment is described.

“Pay her back **as she herself has paid back others**,  
and repay her double **for her deeds**;  
mix a double portion for her in the cup **she mixed.**”

The language is carefully written so it's clear that everything Babylon is about to experience is a direct result of her own actions. She is reaping the destruction of her own destructive behaviors. God wants Babylon to taste the torment that her luxurious lifestyle created for others. Because Babylon's greatness doesn't come without a price. Empires are built on the backs of its citizens, upon those it conquers and enslaves and continues to treat unjustly. The wealth of a few comes at the expense of many.

I love how N.T. Wright puts it, “Babylon is to be given the only medicine she knows, the medicine she mixed for others; she has been using her cup to brew a potion for those she wanted to poison, and **she will now have to drink it herself.**”

“For this reason her plagues will come in a single day,  
death and mourning and famine,  
and she will be burned up with fire;  
for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”

The Babylon of John's day was Rome. To this day, Rome is nicknamed “The Eternal City.” They truly believed it would and will last forever. I wonder if this is why John tells us specifically that it only took one hour for the city to fall.

The Kings and the merchants wail over Babylon. Those who counted on this evil empire as their source of power and wealth are now left desolate. Verses 11-13 detail how the economy of Babylon has crashed. An economy built on the backs of *slaves, human souls*.

Marty Solomon describes this scene, “We've seen the imminent demise of Empire. The Olympic Games have concluded. The victor is taking the stand. The verdict is in and the gavel has been slammed. **The beast has been shown for what it truly is.**”

We'd like to think the empires of this day and age are different. That our economic security is no longer dependent on slavery or oppression, and that our prosperity doesn't come at the cost of others. But if we dig beneath the surface, can we say that with integrity?

Does our economic system work for the least of these? How many companies turn a blind eye to the condition of those who produce the products they depend on? Many articles have been written about the industries that still seem to rest on the backs of human souls in a way that would make us shudder.

- [Fast fashion](#)
- [Child labor](#)
- [Coffee production](#)
- [Technology](#)

And the list goes on and on. Marty Solomon has tough words on this account we all should wrestle with, “This all sounds well and good when we're talking about metaphors and pictures, but this becomes a little bit more personal when the Empire being denounced is the basic description of what most of us would call the pursuit of happiness. It might be...that the invitation of Revelation 18 falls to you and I as much today as it ever has.”

“Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea.”

Does this remind you of anything? How about Jesus’ words in [Mark 9](#)? “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.”

Babylon has caused the little ones to stumble and now will be thrown down into the sea, the very place this beast emerged. The one who brings chaos will be cast down into the sea of chaos, the place of decreation. The monster goes back to the place monsters come from.

This last section from verses 21 to 24 reads like a tragedy to me. What’s listed (musicians, craftsmen, light, weddings, trade) are all things that represent the *good* in humanity. These are the very things that were supposed to take place in the city—we were created to bring out the potential of the earth for human flourishing. But all that good is tainted by the darkness. What held so much potential for beauty and goodness and creativity is poisoned by violence and death, by those final words in v. 24.

“And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.”

Our empires today are filled with so much good, so much potential—medicine and art, literature, technology, industries, incredible food and so much more. But that doesn’t mean it’s all good.

As followers of Jesus, we’re called to wrestle with the realities of empire, to recognize where our participation may be leading us toward the worship of anything other than God, or where we might be tangled up with systems of injustice and oppression. We’re called to do what we can in our small pocket of the world to make things right, *on earth as it is in heaven*.

– AJ

## Tuesday | Revelation 19:1-21

Chapter 19 begins with a heavenly chorus crying, “Hallelujah!” Curiously, this is the only place that Hallelujah (meaning ‘praise the Lord!’ in Hebrew) appears in the entire New Testament, but John repeats it four times, building a crescendo of praise. This is a song of triumph!

In this victory song, John quotes from multiple prayers in the Old Testament of a specific variety: *imprecatory prayers*. These prayers, often found in Psalms (like Ps. [69](#) and [109](#)), invoked God’s judgment on behalf of his people. Now, I’ll admit that these Psalms can be difficult to read as Modern Western people; they seem really harsh, and might make you ask “Are we *really* allowed to pray for that?” But here is what we have to understand: **these prayers are honest expressions of the true feelings of people suffering under the weight of injustice**. They cry out for God’s vindication because they are desperate to be freed from their situation and yearn that their oppressors would not get away with their wrongdoing. Not only that, but imprecatory prayers were revolutionary for their time. In ancient Canaanite and later Greco-Roman cultures, it was the norm for victims of injustice to seek retribution by turning to pagan magic, like casting spells or curses. So, it is actually an act of *righteousness and fidelity* for the Hebrew poets to turn to God instead, leaving the outcome and retribution in His hands.

Our reading from yesterday ended with the words, “And in her was found the blood of prophets

and of saints and all who have been slain on earth.” This is exactly the type of injustice, wrought by Babylons throughout the ages, that would move Israelites to their imprecatory prayers! Yet, in Revelation, John shows us that we can replace our imprecatory prayers with shouts of joy because God has moved on behalf of his people. The greed, strife, conflict, manipulation, and oppression of Babylon, in all of its forms, has been defeated. Forever.

This is why they cry out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” It’s a morbid picture, yes, but their point is that Babylon’s defeat is not temporary. Her overthrow is final, and they will never have to suffer at her hands again (or struggle to resist all of her temptations and lies!).

The song then shifts, as the great multitude in heaven exclaims,

“The **marriage of the Lamb** has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure”

The idea of a marriage or wedding between God and his people stretches back to the ancient tradition of Israel as the LORD’s bride, such as this beautiful passage from Hosea 2:

“And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Master.’... I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.”

Jesus also picks up this wedding imagery in the Gospels (ex. [Matt. 25](#)) and paints pictures of a king’s wedding feast that he is about to throw for his son, and in these parables, Jesus exhorts his disciples to stay alert and get ready for the wedding day because it is coming.”

John draws on all of these images and proclaims, “The wedding day is finally here!”

N.T. Wright says, “This is what the world had been waiting for, ever since Genesis 1, ever since the covenant with Abraham (which always envisaged the birth of a family), ever since the covenant with Moses, ever since the renewal of the covenant promised at the time of the exile. **Marriage is the ultimate covenant, Jesus is the ultimate bridegroom.**”

No longer will the people of God chase after other ‘husbands’—the temptation of Babylon is gone. No longer will suffering or pain distance their hearts from him because suffering will be no more. No longer will sin drive a wedge between them because he will defeat it forever.

The end for which God has been working since things went wrong is finally coming to fruition: a perfect, complete, eternal union between him and his people, just as he always intended!

But after the wedding is announced, the scene suddenly shifts. We are suddenly on a battlefield, watching a rider head into battle, and to our surprise, this is Jesus!

I want to acknowledge that the image of Jesus that we see in v. 11-16 is jarring. Since chapter 5, every single time we have seen Jesus, he has been portrayed as what?

A lamb. A slain lamb, to be more specific.

But now, in chapter 19, the image morphs for the first time, and we see Jesus riding into battle on a white horse, wearing a robe dipped in blood with a sword coming out of his mouth. What a contrast! If you feel discomfort about this image, you are not alone. Our initial reaction is to assume that Jesus is covered in the blood of his enemies, using his sword to cut them down...

How do we reconcile this Jesus with the Lamb? How do we reconcile this Jesus with the one in the Gospels who preached nonviolence and enemy love? The one who told us to turn the other cheek, pray for those who persecute you, to lay down your life for your friends and enemies alike. The one who gave us the greatest example of enemy love by dying for all mankind.

This is our last week in Revelation, and by now, John has proved himself to be a sophisticated communicator. We have spent the last several weeks watching him subvert expectations, turn our assumptions upside down, and play with images in masterful ways. And the same John is at it again in this passage. **I think the key to understanding this passage is to trace how John has been using the image of blood, specifically the image of someone dipped in blood, throughout the book.**

Think back with me to [chapter 7](#), when we first met the great multitude of believers that follow the Lamb. How were they described? John told us that they were the ones who “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” and they were proclaiming that salvation belongs to the Lamb!

How about [chapter 12](#)? We saw this great multitude again, locked in a battle with the dragon, and do you remember how they overcame him?

*“They conquered him by the **blood of the Lamb** and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”*

So, when we get to chapter 19, I think we need to ask ourselves, “Has blood been an important image that John has been building thus far.” And the answer is absolutely yes!

Remembering that we are interacting with a sophisticated author, we need to resist the temptation to assume that John is doing a 180 and showing us Warrior Jesus, covered in the blood of his enemies. Firstly, the battle hasn’t even begun—it starts later in the chapter—so he hasn’t defeated the enemies yet. Second, each time someone has been covered in blood in Revelation, whose blood has it been? The Lamb’s!

It seems to me that **Jesus is covered in his own blood**. He is, in a sense, riding into battle pre-bloodied.

*Well, what about the sword?* you may ask.

The fact that it is coming out of his mouth is not just absurd but a big clue here. If you remember back to [Ephesians 6](#), when Paul is listing out the armor of God, he talks about the “sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” And it just so happens that John refers to Jesus as the Word of God in Revelation 19...

The idea here is that he is overcoming by **proclaiming the good news about himself and the Kingdom of God, which he opened up to all who trust in him.**

Putting these two images together, we realize that John has, once again, subverted our expectations. He used this violent, militaristic imagery and turns it all upside down.

N.T. Wright puts it better than I could:

“Jesus himself spoke of victory—but it was not the victory one might expect, over the forces of Rome. Indeed, when others wanted to fight Rome, he hinted strongly if strangely that this was missing the proper target. The true enemy was the dark power that stood behind Rome and all other pagan empires. Jesus spoke about fighting a battle with the real enemy, the satan, the one who had led all humanity, Israel included, into rebellion against the creator God. And Jesus seems to have believed that the ultimate way to fight this true battle was by giving up his life. It is this that explains the military imagery of the present passage. Once more, this is symbolic language, truly pointing to a reality which lies beyond it... **The victory here is a victory over all pagan power, which means a victory over violence itself.** ...As John’s readers know well by now, the actual weapons which Jesus uses to win the battle are his own blood, his loving self-sacrifice.”

This idea of overcoming or ‘winning’ is a conversation we have been having since the beginning of Revelation, so I don’t want to belabor the point. But I think it is unmistakable and undeniable that overcoming in the way of the slain Lamb is one of the dominant themes of Revelation, and it is one of my own greatest takeaways from this book.

I am in awe of the trail of breadcrumbs that John leaves for us, building this theme from the letters to the churches to this battlefield scene. I am *convicted* by what this means for my own life, and it is shaping me. I hope that, page by page, it has been working its way into your heart, too.

So, as you and I wait for the wedding feast that is still to come, for the day when we—the people of God—will finally be joined to him in a perfect union, *we must get ready*.

How do we get ready? John has shown us. We clothe ourselves in righteousness (v. 8) by loving God and others well. We imitate the self-sacrificial love and grace of the Lamb. We proclaim our testimony.

And one day, love and truth will overcome, once and for all.

– EH

## Wednesday | Revelation 20:1-15

The beast and the false prophet are captured, all that’s left to deal with is the dragon. Interestingly, though we are geared up for battle, no fighting actually happens. This is the case throughout Revelation. Even though we get scenes of mighty armies set up to do their worst, no actual fighting ever takes place. We’re talking about Satan! The great enemy of God, the adversary. And yet we’re simply told that in one moment he is seized and bound up.

There can be no question who is ultimately in control of the world and the cosmos. For all his evil and croaking like a frog, Satan doesn’t hold a candle to the power of our God. Evil stands no chance of being victorious in the end.

This next passage is confusing, and even though this is the only place where it's mentioned, the Millennium has captured the hearts and attentions of countless scholars and theologians. Why doesn't God just do away with Satan now once and for all? Why bind him only temporarily to let him loose upon the world all over again for a time?

There are many [different views on the millennium](#) but they boil down to three big categories: Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Premillennialism. The article I linked above summarizes these three views:

- Amillennialists do not expect a future literal 1,000, but rather view it as Christ's reign with his saints during the time between his two comings.
- Postmillennialists believe Christ returns after the millennium as a golden age when the majority of the world has converted to Christianity.
- Premillennialists believe Christ returns before the millennium preceded by a period of intense tribulation.

I find myself squarely in the amillennialist view. The kingdom is here and now as Jesus already told us. And those who worship the Father and the Lamb are reigning with him.

But don't get too wrapped up in this debate. It's important to put these views in perspective. Marty Solomon argues this whole idea is a Jewish way of saying, "There will be an era where the Kingdom of God is seen clearly for what it is. It's an apocalyptic message of hope, that all of the struggles that we go through, it's not in vain... John wants everybody to know that all those who have given their lives not to worship the beast and take his mark, all those who gave their lives to live rightly, they get to reign with Christ."

N.T. Wright says it's like Satan "must be allowed a final moment to flail around with his lies and accusations, so that in his overthrow it will be clear beyond the slightest doubt that 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those in the Messiah Jesus'."

Whatever this thousand-year reign is, it ends with Satan once more being let out to deceive the nations, who are called Gog and Magog. These are figures from the Old Testament, specifically [Ezekiel 38-39](#). Gog is portrayed as a leader who will come against God's people, Magog is his territory. They represent the potential for future rebellion against God and God's people. But in Ezekiel, God deals with them swiftly.

"When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign Lord. In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel." (Ezekiel 38:18-19)

"I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coastlands, and they will know that I am the Lord." (Ez. 39:6).

The point of these passages is that God is going to destroy the opposition, so the people will know He is the Lord. In Revelation, another coalition gathers against God's people, and they will meet the same fate. And at long last the devil, the great adversary and accuser, will be thrown into the sea where the beast met its ultimate end as well.

## **The Final Judgment**

This chapter comes to a close with a vision of the final judgment of God. The great throne takes

center stage, as the earth's dead stand before him, awaiting their fate.

"Then another book was opened, which is the book of life."

The word for book is the same word used for scroll earlier in Revelation when talking about the scroll with the seven seals. This is a second scroll, the scroll of life. [We've heard about this scroll in different parts of Revelation](#). In it are the names of the victorious, the ones dressed in white, the ones who haven't worshiped the beast and its image. These are the ones who've conquered, who have been faithful to God and the Lamb. That is what they have *done*. Their faith in Jesus, their unwillingness to bow to the beast.

The Old Testament Jewish ideology had no category for faithfulness being a debate between belief and works. Your faith was your works. And the New Testament constantly blurs the lines between our faith in Jesus and our works. We talked about this idea a while back as we studied James.

What we discovered is that true faith, the kind that leads to an inward transformation of the heart as Jesus taught, is not merely an intellectual exercise—it's a total surrender. And when we surrender our lives to the way of Jesus, when we are so compelled and transformed by him through the Holy Spirit, it shows up in the way we live. We love God and love others as a result of our faith. In that way, talking about what we *did* is tantamount to talking about what we *believe*. Because they are one in the same.

Grace is unconditioned, a free gift given to us by God with nothing we could ever do to earn it or deserve it. But grace is not unconditional. While we are not saved by good works, we are saved *for* good works. We can't earn God's love, but we are called to respond to God's love by how we love God and love others in return.

We've reached the moment in this great stage drama where the final bosses are cast into the lake of fire. Death itself is overturned. What's coming is a new reality, a new creation where death and the forces of destruction have no place. There will be no more evil, no more adversaries, no more accusers, no more opposition to God and the rule of the Kingdom of Jesus.

This is good news!

Today, these forces are still at work in the world. We are surrounded by the stark realities of death and Hades. Satan is still hanging around desperate to do as much damage as possible before he is ultimately dealt with.

But we can rest assured that no matter how dark the world gets, no matter how much we feel the impact of these evil forces, God will win in the end. There is no darkness so great that the light of Christ will not shine through. Whenever it feels like the enemy is winning, remember this moment.

Good wins in the end. And all will one day be made right.

It is for this reason we shout, "Come, Lord Jesus!" We yearn for the day when all that poisons God's good world will be destroyed once and for all.

Until then, Revelation calls us to *faithfulness*. We link arms with the Lamb and join his kingdom,

we love God and we love others through the way we live bringing more of heaven to earth now, pushing back the forces of darkness. *On earth as it is in heaven.*

– AJ

## Thursday | Revelation 21:1-27

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

This is what we read on page one of the Bible, and as we flip to the last page of Revelation, the culmination of the entire Bible, John's mind is called back there. God has redeemed what was corrupted, raised what was dead, and destroyed those who destroyed his good world. All threats, evil, suffering, and death are now no more. The reign of sin and death are over. This is a new beginning. And so, when John thinks about the reign of abundant life that is about to begin, he tells us:

In the *new* beginning, God created the *new* heavens and the *new* earth.

God promises us that he will make all things new (v. 5), and when John sets out to describe what it will be like when God does, he does so through what I can only describe as a kaleidoscope of images (new birth, a wedding, Eden, Jerusalem, etc.). We should take these images no more literally than we do the images of the dragon or beast, but they cast a breathtaking vision of hope for our future. As Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

John shows us the bride of the Lamb (remember back to our discussion on Tuesday) coming *down* from heaven to earth and proclaims,

"Behold, **the dwelling place of God is with man**. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

What a beautiful promise! The word 'dwell' here is important because it is the word that is used to talk about God's presence in the temple in Jerusalem, revealing his glory in the midst of his people, AND it is the word we see in the Gospel of John to describe the incarnation of Jesus: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Jesus became flesh and moved into our neighborhood. And what God did in Jesus, he is now doing on a cosmic scale.

John describes this dwelling place of God, the New Jerusalem, in more detail in v. 12-21 with symbolic numbers and images. He tells us that there will be twelve gates, twelve angels, the names of the twelve tribes on the gates, and the names of the twelve apostles on the twelve foundations. He is nearly shouting the number twelve at us, and by now, you are experts. You know that 12 means he is referring to the people of God, and since he is talking about the tribes of Israel *and* the apostles, he is pointing to the unity of the people of God from all nations—Jew and Gentile.

It gets even better. In v. 15, John launches into a detailed description of the measurements of the city, which might seem a little odd and rather boring to us (*Why bother with measurements*

*when you are telling me about paradise?!*). But he is pointing back to Ezekiel's vision of the new temple. Ezekiel prophesied about a very large temple—much larger than Solomon's and large enough to encompass the whole city of Jerusalem.

John's measurements are astronomically larger! It's as if he is saying, "No, we need to dream far bigger than that!" He measures the city and finds that it is a 12,000 stadia square (again, we know that 12=people of God, and 1,000=complete community), which is about 1,500 miles each way. Not only that, but it is also 1,500 miles high, which means that it is a gigantic cube.

Why does this matter, you ask? Two reasons. First, this is roughly the same area as the Roman Empire (which was most of the known world, in John's day). Second, the Holy of Holies, the most sacred of spaces within the temple in Jerusalem was shaped like a cube.

If we think back to chapter 11, we saw a vision of the Holy of Holies opening up, allowing all people to access the presence of God, but John one-ups his former image here. The New Jerusalem is so large that it encompasses the known world, and it is all one big Holy of Holies. In other words, the whole world will be like the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum, the most intimate and sacred place. **And we will all be in it forever.**

John is telling us that we will not just be invited into God's presence but that God's presence will completely fill and cover and **flood** the earth!

Thinking about it this way, it makes total sense when John tells us, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." He is not saying that the temple will be abolished because it was a bad idea, but because, as N.T. Wright says, "**The Temple was the advance model of God's great hidden plan for the whole cosmos, now at last to be realized.**"

Habakkuk prophesied that "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." The people of God will know him fully because they will live in his Holy of Holies, and this is true paradise.

Do you notice the direction this is all moving in? Everything is coming down. God is coming down, the New Jerusalem is coming down... Just as we discussed in Revelation 11, the picture of our eternal paradise that John paints is about the earth becoming the kingdom of God, not the people of God being whisked away to a better non-physical reality. It seems to me that **the picture isn't about escaping earth but restoring it to the goodness and completeness that God always intended in the Garden.** The action is *here*.

This might be jarring for us. You may not have grown up thinking that our final destination will be an evacuation to a non-physical kingdom in the sky (I did), but that is what many people understand the Christian vision of eternity to be. And the picture John paints of God coming down to dwell with humans doesn't seem to square with it.

So what will the New Heavens and New Earth look like? That's an excellent question. I can only adopt a posture of humility and tell you that I don't know exactly. I have plenty of my own suspicions, based on the biblical story, but I will leave you to chew on this idea of heaven coming down (rather than us going up) and consider what you think it means. Just let the poetry work its way into your heart and mind. (If you have ideas or want to ask questions about what Alex and I think, we would love to talk with you about it! Let's meet over coffee to dream up what we think it will look like together).

But what I do know is this. The New Heavens and New Earth will be different, and you and I will be different. Nothing will fall apart or become corrupted or end—including us. Throughout the chapter, John shows us that all threats, like darkness or chaotic waters, are being removed (v. 1, 23). All pain is gone, all reasons for sadness are gone, and all death is gone.

I, like John, find that language begins to fail me when I talk about these things, and I can only point to images, symbols, and stories. One of them is from the *The Lord of the Rings*. Just after the climax of the trilogy, Samwise Gamgee discovers that his friend Gandalf was not dead (as he thought), but alive. He cries, “I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! *Is everything sad going to become untrue?*”

The answer of Christianity to that question is—yes. **Everything sad is going to come untrue**, not because we finally get things right but because of God’s great mercy and unfailing covenant love, and *it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost*.

But perhaps my favorite story that depicts the New Beginning that we await is from *The Chronicles of Narnia* (fellow book nerds, apparently this email section is for you). At the end of the series, C.S. Lewis reflects beautifully the biblical truth we see in Revelation:

“The Narnia you’re thinking of was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia, which has always been here and always will be here... *You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy*. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream.” . . . The new [Narnia] was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can’t describe it any better than that: if you ever get there, you will know what I mean. It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He cried: “I have come home at last! *This is my real country!* I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. **The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this**... The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had *only been the cover and the title page*: now at least they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: **in which every chapter is better than the one before.**”

God is making all things new, little by little, and he is already doing it in you and me. As followers of Jesus, we have a foot in two worlds: the Old Creation and the New. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

Because of Jesus, there is a new quality of existence that is happening right now, and you and I are being invited into it as disciples of Jesus. Outwardly, I am in the Old Creation in a body that is wasting away, but inwardly, a new way of existing is being birthed in me. To quote Paul again, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**. The old has gone, the new has come.”

We have a foot in two worlds, and life with Jesus gives us glimpses of Paradise now, as we wait for the day when Paradise will be all there is.

It is my great hope and expectation that in the New Heavens and New Earth, we will say “The reason we loved the Old Earth is that sometimes it looked a little like this.” This earth is just the title page.

– EH

## Friday | Revelation 22:1-21

Revelation 21 and 22 are my absolute favorites. There are so many different universes activated by mere phrases that it’s hard to decide which one to zero in on. The more you familiarize yourself with the Biblical story as a whole, the more these two chapters will come to life before your eyes. This is the work of a *lifetime* of study, one that never gets old or boring, but continues to surprise and delight us.

There are two themes in particular that catch my attention: The [Water of Life](#) and the [Tree of Life](#). Go watch the Bible Project videos linked above if you want the short version, but there are also accompanying podcast series I’d highly recommend if you want to go deeper. You may be familiar with these themes from our studies of John and our Advent Devotional called [Rooted](#).

### Water of Life

In the beginning, there was a [spring in Genesis](#) that bubbled up from the earth and spread out to water the whole earth. This spring came from the Garden, the hotspot of God’s presence. After the Fall, humans are cut off from these life-giving waters. But [God continues to provide water](#) for His people in surprising ways.

During the time of the Prophets, rebellious Israel is described as going after other sources of water. Jeremiah 2:13 says, “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Instead of trusting God to provide, the people dug out their own sources of water. But these were broken cisterns that couldn’t actually help them. They only left the people thirsty.

And aren’t we so guilty of this, too? There are all kinds of things we’re “thirsty” for. Rather than trusting in God to be the one to satisfy our thirst, we carve out sources of water for ourselves. And they only leave us wanting; We become dry and crusty.

In [Ezekiel 37](#), God’s people are described as “dry bones.” They need God’s Spirit and water poured out over them. Indeed, the prophets looked forward to the day when a fountain would burst forth from the house of God ([Joel 3](#)). Jesus talked a lot about water, also. Think about his conversation in [John 4](#) with the woman at the well. In [John 7:37](#) he says, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” And when Jesus is pierced on the cross in [John 19](#), it’s both blood and water that spring forth; It is Jesus’ death that gives life to the whole world like that first spring in the Garden.

Now in Revelation, the water of life takes full shape. In Rev. 21 God says, “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.” Access to the waters of life is being restored as a gift from God! Revelation 22 opens with this theme.

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 through the middle of the street of the city.”

The spring has become a rushing river, flowing from the very heart of God and the Lamb and giving life to the entire city, the new creation. And as it flows it passes the other familiar theme.

### **The Tree of Life**

On either side of the river sits the Tree of Life in all its splendor. The Tree of Life was at the center of the Garden, emanating from the presence of God. The Tree of Life represented our ability to have eternal communion with God, to live forever with him in the Garden. This tree represents the most important choice we could make, because to get to it, we had to walk past a second tree in the Garden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. To be with God means trusting God to define what is right and not right for us, rather than taking that knowledge for ourselves.

But every generation of humans has failed that test. We carve out our own cisterns and do whatever is right in our own eyes. And so we lose access to the Tree, we're cut off from the Garden. But not forever.

Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches” ([John 15:5-11](#)). Through Jesus, we can be connected once again to the Tree of Life because it is in him that we find our life. It is through him we can produce *good fruit*, like the good trees [we were created to be](#).

And in Revelation, this theme takes full bloom. At the heart of the New Creation, being fed by the Water of Life is the Tree. And it has twelve kinds of fruit that never go out of season. In other words, this fruit is for all of God's people, its leaves are for the healing of the nations. The role of God's people to be a blessing to the nations is fulfilled. The gates of the Garden are open wide and all have access to the Tree of Life, which means living forever in communion with God and the Lamb.

“They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

By now, these words should come into focus for us. There is no more mark of the beast; The only allegiance that remains is to God alone—[we bear his name](#). His light is the only light that we need. Remember our [2022 Advent Devotional](#) where we traced the theme of light through the Bible?

Today, we look forward with hopeful eyes to the time when there will be no more darkness—no more mourning, nor death—only the light of Christ in the New Creation city.

### **Jesus is Coming**

At last, we come to the grand finale of this epic tale. Imagine being a Christian facing Roman persecution. Imagine being *any* Christian throughout the generations who find themselves under the boot of Empire, whose world seems overcome by darkness and death. Hear these words:

“These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this

book.”

In other words, we can rest assured that this glorious image of what life will one day be like will come to pass. *Jesus is coming back*. We don't know when, but we can trust that it will happen.

John's only response is worship. And even though the whole book serves as a warning about worshipping the wrong thing, John is not immune from the temptation. He falls down to worship the angel rather than Jesus. And the angel immediately corrects him.

“Worship God.”

How many things do we bow down to in worship that are not God? How many people, ideologies, or created things are we tempted to fall down in front of? What do we give our allegiance, time, and attention to? John is all of us. And the Angels is speaking to all of us in turn.

*Worship God, and God alone!*

Jesus says, “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Let us be among those who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. The ones who cover ourselves with the gift of Jesus' life poured out for each of us. Only then will we be granted access to the Tree of Life within the New Creation.

It's difficult to imagine, but for whatever reason there will always be those who don't want to come in, who seek to live apart from God outside the New City. And in His Grace and Wisdom, God grants them their request. But remember, the gates are never sealed shut, they are always open ([Rev 21:25](#)).

The invitation is open to all of us. The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” *So come*. Come and drink the only waters that can actually satisfy us, the ones offered to us free of cost because the debt has already been paid by the Lamb.

The time has come for us to let go of our broken and dry cisterns. The time has come for us to cast our idols into the fire. The time has come for us to surrender to the Lamb and to His Kingdom way of living.

*On earth as it is in heaven.*

Jesus whispers to us, in a world full of darkness and death and decay. *Don't worry, my Bride. Surely, I am coming soon.*”

And we shout back, with all the hope and love and grace of the Bride forgiven and reconciled.

**“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”**

May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.

Amen.

– AJ

## **Weekly Practice**

As we close out this magnificent work, spend a few moments in prayer before God. If you're with a group or your family, we encourage you to pray this prayer out loud together as a communal liturgy. Feel free to add to it as the Spirit leads you.

God,

Today we thank you that, even though we live in a world where darkness is still apparent, we are not without hope. Today, we're reminded that the dark pockets of our world just mean that the story is not yet finished, that You are still at work in us and through us.

***On earth as it is in heaven.***

God would we be part of bringing heaven to earth in our corner of the world. May the way we live reveal your loving presence to those around us. May Jesus' light flow in us and through us.

***On earth as it is in heaven.***

It's unfathomable that we get to be your partners in bringing new creation into the world. May we never take it for granted that we are carriers of your light in a broken world. So, God, highlight the created things we're tempted to worship in place of you. Would you call us forward to faithfulness, to let go of anything that seeks to keep us from you and your life-giving presence.

***On earth as it is in heaven.***

No matter what we face, we rest assured that you have the final victory. And we look forward with hopeful eyes to the New Creation, when there will be no more darkness—no more mourning, nor death. Until then, together we say, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

***On earth as it is in heaven.***

Amen.

## **Reflection Questions**

- What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
- John says the Bride of Christ will make herself ready by clothing her self in righteous deeds (right relationship). What can you do to have more “right relationships” that glorify God with the people around you? Do you need to seek reconciliation with anyone? Do you need to seek healthier habits in any of your relationships? Do you know anyone lost, hurting, or lonely that you might draw closer to?
- We have been talking about the theme ‘overcoming’ ever since chapter 2 of Revelation. What are you taking away from the picture John paints of overcoming in the way of the slain Lamb? What does that look like for you practically? How is it shaping you?
- What are you thirsty for? What do you find yourself longing for or desiring to have? Are there areas where you're tempted to dig out your own cisterns because you're afraid God won't be enough? Are these sources actually satisfying you or do they leave you wanting more?
- It's not hard to see the ways darkness is still present in the world. Spend a few moments asking God to reveal ways you can be part of spreading the light even as we wait for God to come and make all things right.
- God is making all things new, and that includes us. What has he made new in you through Jesus? What do you hope he will continue to make new?
- What do you think it will be like in the new city at the end of the age? What do you hope it looks like or feels like? What aspect of the New Creation do you most look forward to?
- What themes, images, or ideas are you taking with you as we finish our study of Revelation? What has God been revealing to you through this book?

## Resources

- [Guide to Revelation](#) | The Bible Project | Webpage
- [Heaven and Earth Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation – The Fall of Greatness](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation – The End is a New Beginning](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [The City Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Temple Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Tree of Life Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Water of Life Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Overview \(Ch. 12-21\)](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Class](#) | Teaching Series with Rev. Walt Marcum
- [Reading Revelation Responsibly](#) | Michael J. Gorman | Commentary
- [Revelation for Everyone](#) | N.T. Wright | Commentary