

A New Beginning **Revelation 21:1-22:5**

I remember my second child, Thomas's, birth vividly. It was early on New Year's Eve. After delivery I watched the world, from New Zealand to New York, usher in the new millennium. In every kind of language and every sort of fireworks display, people from all over the world reveled in the possibilities of what was ahead. Tara and I also knew that Thomas would mean a whole new chapter in our lives as well. Now, on the cusp of our fourth child we eagerly look forward to another new chapter that has begun to unfold.

Life is filled with new beginnings (marriage, family, houses, cars and graduations), yet the reality is that the new chapters that unfold are inevitably captive to older plots that we can never finally escape. As much as we long for newness, so much of reality is about a battle with the Old. As much as would like for it to be different, this truth is undeniable. We all live with the ongoing battle with the Old:

- Weight and body image
- Death and disease
- Abuse and addiction
- Pollution and decay
- Success and enslavement

No matter how hard we try our houses decay, our clothes wear out and our cars break. In the area of relationships, our loved ones die, spouses become distant, our children move away and our friends flirt with betrayal. Even in excess we battle the Old—too much money becomes dangerous, too much food kills and too much technology is abused. Whether we are in plenty or in want, there remains one constant—the battle against the Old.

Framing the problem among Non-Christians & Christians:

If you're a *non-Christian*, such a reality must be disconcerting.

- So much so, it might tempt you to deny such a struggle altogether. **Denial** is often the most effective strategy against the cold, hard realities of a world that does not work. Telling ourselves that death and decay is normal may seem to solve some problems, but it creates a whole host of even more difficult ones.
- Another technique might be **false hope**. It is tempting to believe that with a little more effort, a little more money and a little more education one might be able to gain victory over the down-drag of death and brokenness in this world.
- And yet another strategy might be simply **anger and despair**. Why bother with any form of hope? Why not give ourselves over to the hopelessness of this world?

Whatever your strategy: denial, false hope or despair, the battle with the Old rages.

Even as *Christians*, we battle with the Old.

Yes, the Bible teaches us that we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Even so, our newness is not consummated. Though, we are really new, we are not totally new. Our battle continues with decaying bodies, broken relationships and transgression of God's commandments.

Sometimes a Christian tells me that they do not understand why they are still able to do such terrible things, think such terrible things and struggle in so many terrible ways. Well, part of the answer is understanding what Francis Schaeffer used to teach. *Though we are substantially new, we are not totally new!* The battle with the Old remains a part of our struggle as Christians.

Of course, there are some who fantasize about a life on this side of heaven wherein newness dominates. Such teaching is dangerously naïve not only because it does not deal faithfully with the Bible's teaching, but also because it creates false expectations among Christians. People give up on the Christian life because they believe that they were not victorious enough, perfect enough, healthy enough.

I've got news for us. The battle with the Old remains even after one becomes a Christian. As I remark to my young people who are preparing for marriage. Adam and Eve ushered in three main forms of alienation: alienation with God, alienation with one another and alienation with creation. The alienation created by Adam and Eve's sin remains with us.

But, and this is perhaps the second greatest interjection in world history. If the first is the "but God, being rich in mercy..." (Eph. 2:4) which showcases the merciful God who sent forth his Son to die for our sins, the second great interjection of world history is God's purpose to usher in the consummation of the ages—a truly new beginning! Jesus' life, death and resurrection are only the background to the story. His cross work is what makes a whole new beginning possible.

It is that whole new beginning that is revealed for us in Revelation 21:1-22:5. Herein lies the hopes of the ages where there is no more battle with the Old. Only new lies here! According to verses 5-6,

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Such words should encourage us with a vision of the New that fuel our hopes in the present and remind us that the battle with the Old will eventually fade for those who are in Christ.

This sections provides three important windows into the newness that will characterize the age to come: 1) The New Heavens and the New Earth, 2) The New Jerusalem & 3) The New Marriage of the Lamb

1) The New Heavens and the New Earth (21:1-4)

- **What It Is:** Put precisely, Christ's return means the restoration of all things. In verse 1, we see that the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more." Such is a powerful reminder that battle with the Old is now over because a whole new earth and heaven has been ushered in. John's revelation that there is no sea does not mean that the majesty and powerful splendor of the ocean will be absent from heaven. Rather, as an ancient reader would have quickly understood, the sea as the symbol of chaos, fear and death will not characterize the age to come. If you will remember, the evil Beast rose from the Sea and the Spirit calmed with chaotic waters prior to creation.
- **What it Means:** Verse four makes it clear what the New Heavens and New Earth mean for our lives—every tear wiped away, death shall be no more, nor shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain of any kind. It means the battle with the Old—with death, decay, pollution and sickness shall be no more.

It is hard for us to imagine what is being revealed for us right here. I know that many of us believe heaven to be a place where we will exist as non-material spirits, floating along on clouds, constantly singing hymns. Such negative views about the material realm, the Bible knows nothing of. The Bible affirms our material existence not as evil, but cursed. The end of the ages brings an end to the curse and so a renewal of all things.

As a result, verses 1-4 reveal not a total disjunction with what is past, but a restoration of what is past in completely renovated form. The bible tells us that like Jesus we will have resurrected bodies and dwell on a renewed earth which will continuity with this earth and sky. The glories that are yet to come can only be imagined.

- Reunion with loved ones who have passed on in Christ
- Freedom from bodies that decay—a glorified self
- The glory and splendor of a renewed earth and universe

2) The New Jerusalem (21:10-26)

In verse 10 we read, “and he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and show me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.” Now immediately our thoughts should not be drawn to Lando Calrissian’s City in the Clouds. While a literal city is in view, it is not one where the streets are paved with literal gold. The images of this city are so multi-faceted that it rules out literal fulfillment.

Let’s see if we can understand what the imagery should lead us to conclude about this new city:

- **It comes down from heaven (10)** As opposed to Babylon which sought to reach to heaven this city descends from heaven originating with God’s gracious purposes, not with the efforts of sinful humanity. **It is a city of grace, not man’s self-effort.**

Illustration: Frontline article on how Wall Street made of Worldcom. Recently, Citigroup settled a class action suit for \$2 billion for how it also mislead investors to buy stock in Enron. Such is the character of every earthly city—greed, power and deceit gain are the order of the day.

- **Its name is the twelve tribes and twelve apostles (12-13, 22-27)** Imagining a city with twelve foundations is nearly impossible, yet some have tried. No, the imagery of the apostles and tribes of Israel is designed to help us see that this is the realized people of God who have come together in peace and harmony. This is the city of Shalom. God has finally fulfilled his purpose for the people of God. They now exist in perfect harmony.

Verse 25 further builds on this imagery, “Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.” This serves as a powerful reminder that this city will be characterized by what we long for in a true city—peace. This is a city where enemies do not exist. To loosely translate, heaven will be a place where there will be no need to lock our doors for there will be no one seeking to take advantage of our lives.

What he began with Abraham, he has consummated through the work of the Apostles who brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations of the earth. **It is a city where God’s purpose is fulfilled and man’s longing for relationship is satisfied because it is accomplished by God’s efforts.**

Such is the heavenly city of God—the city of grace that satisfies the deepest longing of our hearts. What does it mean for us to dwell in this earthly city where the battle with the Old rages and yet live in the hope of the Heavenly City to come?

Is our hope Toyota plants, a Spurs championship or better streets and city services? Is it the political power of Washington D.C. or the monetary dominance of New York? What is the real longing of our hearts? Isn’t it the city where all of these longings converge: safety, health, peace, provision and fulfillment? Is this not the vision of chapter 21?

How does chapter 21 increase our longing and enable us to live with meaning in the present?

3) The New Marriage of the Lamb (21:2-3, 9; 22:1-5)

There is one more dominant image that fills the vision of the end of the ages—the Marriage of the Lamb. Verse 2 tells us that the heavenly city comes down from heaven “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Verse 9 is a revelation of the Bride, the chosen people of God, the wife of the Lamb.

Whereas the New Heavens and the New Earth deals with our alienation with creation and the New Jerusalem deals with our alienation from our fellow humanity, the New Marriage of the Lamb addresses the ultimate source of all alienation—our ruptured relationship with Almighty God. The end of the ages will be the fulfillment of the deepest desire of our hearts to know and be known by God. As verse 3 reveals, “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!” Such is the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose of us—to be in complete and unbroken relationship with him.

- **Prepared Bride (period of betrothal/forgiven and cleansed)**
- **With a Restored Purpose (Eden returns: Tree of Life & River of Life)**

Illustration: Trip to the headwater spring of the San Antonio River. Observe the city that has grown up around that bubbling fountain. It has brought forth life. The Scriptures postulate another fountain from which a new world are nurtured. That fountain we call the person and work of Jesus Christ. We will forever eat from his fruits and drink from its waters.

How are we to live on this side of the Battle with the Old, something that is such a pervasive part of our existence? What releases us from despair, false hopes or from denial? Only by contemplating the age to come! May the New Heavens & New Earth, the New Jerusalem and the New Marriage of the Lamb increase the desire of our hearts! May our desires not be stifled, but intensified!

T. S. Eliot, in his poem, “The Gidding,” contemplates the end of the ages necessitating the death of air, the death of earth the death of water and of fire. He continues to describe who devised a world wherein so much suffering exists?

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

Here Eliot envisions two endings that Love brings forth—either judgment or grace. But both are fiery. Yet for those who subject themselves to the awesomeness of grace and find themselves wrapped within his powerful and merciful arms Eliot’s next two lines are true for all eternity,

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.

My friends, we can only imagine what is yet to come. But when it comes, what has been will be changed forever. And then what is will grow ever sweeter.