

# The Heavenly Vision

Revelation 21:1-22:5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; <sup>3</sup>and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people,<sup>o</sup> and God himself will be with them;<sup>o</sup> <sup>4</sup>he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup>And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup>And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. <sup>7</sup>He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. <sup>8</sup>But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.” <sup>9</sup>Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” <sup>10</sup>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, <sup>11</sup>having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup>It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; <sup>13</sup>on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup>And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup>And he who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. <sup>16</sup>The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; and he measured the city with his rod, twelve thousand stadia;<sup>o</sup> its length and breadth and height are equal. <sup>17</sup>He also measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits by a man’s measure, that is, an angel’s. <sup>18</sup>The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. <sup>19</sup>The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, <sup>20</sup>the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. <sup>21</sup>And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. <sup>22</sup>And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup>And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, <sup>25</sup>and its gates shall never be shut by day—and there shall be no night there; <sup>26</sup>they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of

the nations. <sup>27</sup>But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. 22: <sup>1</sup>Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life<sup>o</sup> with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup>There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; <sup>4</sup>they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

### Preliminary Observations:

1. **Is heaven on your spiritual radar?** The question may seem strange but the truth is that heaven is not a big part of a people spiritual life today. It is been remarked that there are very few sermons on hell any more but it is also true that there are very few sermons on heaven! Until the last hundred years or so life was brutal and it was short. Heaven was a longed-for release from this valley of tears. People longed for heaven and feared to lose it. But most sermons and spiritual books today focus on life in this world and how to make it a better place. This is not wrong but heaven has moved to the periphery. Even our so-called spiritual life is mostly about worldly matters. When people pray aloud they usually pray for things like better health, better finances, a job opportunity, improvement in a relationship etc. It almost seems like our main focus is to ask God to make this world a better place, so much so that if we have enough health, creature comforts, and friendship we'd just assume stay here forever. It is not wrong to pray for these things but again, we must remember that are true destination is heaven and to be with God and we should long for it and pray for it every day. When was the last time you really meditated on heaven, when was the last time you really longed for it and to be with God?
2. **Why is it important to meditate on heaven?** In the second letter to the Corinthians and the ninth chapter St. Paul meditates on the virtues of an athlete and compares it to that of a Christian competing for the great reward of heaven. St. Paul reflects on how athletes deny themselves and exercise great self-control to train for a prize that withers (instead of trophies athletes received laurel wreaths in those days). But think of Paul's image for a moment here. For the sake of a moment of glory, and a medal or trophy athletes will engage in tremendous training regimens which are both difficult and demanding. Most get up early and train hard. Long hours and exhausting work outs. What keeps them going? The potential of the reward! The reward makes them willing to make sacrifices and work hard! If the athlete had no interest in the reward they would never get up so early for work so hard. Well, heaven is our reward! This reward is far greater than some medal or trophy. For the sake of it we are asked to make great sacrifices, to resist temptation and to develop

our “spiritual physique” by God's grace for then we will be ready to claim the prize! But if heaven does not interest us were is only some sort of a vague notion, we will not be very motivated to undertake the sacrifices necessary. Hence, it is important for us to develop a deep desire for heaven and to be with God. Only then, will the sacrificial and moral life makes sense to us and seem a sacrifice worth making.

3. **How is heaven to be understood?** At one level, we are beyond our league here. The Scripture says that eye has not seen in years not heard nor is it ever dawned on the heart of man what God has in store for those who love and trust him (1 Cor 2:9). The first letter of John says "What we shall later be has not yet come to light. But we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2) Hence, we long for something beyond our wildest imagining, something so glorious and fulfilling that we cannot now grasp it. The reading we have here tonight gives us some touchstones for our meditation and we will discuss them in detail in a minute. But for now, it might be important to mention a serious thing to avoid as we meditate on heaven. We must avoid the tendency to be "self-centered" in our imaginings of heaven. Often when I ask people to described heaven I am surprised what they leave out. They mention mansions, streets paved with gold, the fact that they will be happy, that they will see relatives and friends who've died, Angels, clouds etc. and I keep waiting and wondering if God will be mentioned! Many people leave God out of their description of heaven! But, as we shall see, the heart of heaven is to be with God!
4. **What will we “do” in heaven?** - here too, us remember our disclaimer that heaven cannot be understood or explained easily and earthly terms. But one way of answering this question is to say that we will be swept up into a celebration of the heavenly liturgy. Revelation Chapters 4 and 5 describe the Saints is celebrating a great liturgy in heaven. Much of what they do we should seem very familiar to us. There are hymns being sung, there are candles, incense, the Lamb of God on the throne or altar. The Saints where long white robes, or albs. There are postures such as standing, and kneeling or prostration. A book, or scroll is read from. Well, you get the point, heaven is much like the celebration of the Mass. In fact, one way to understand the Mass, is that it is a great foretaste or dress rehearsal of the glory of heaven. It is not so much that heaven comes down to us but that we, for a brief time, are swept up into heaven. At one point the priest says to the people, "Lift up your hearts!" This is the invitation that John received in the book of Revelation to "Come up Here." (Rev. 4) In the Mass, we are joined to the great choir of saints and angels who praise God night and day without ceasing and enjoy holy communion with him for eternity.
5. Let's look at tonight's text.

Commentary on the Passage:

1. ***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away*** - notice here that in order to inherit heaven we have to die from this world. Don't miss the obvious. In order to go to heaven, we have to leave here. What does heaven cost? Answer -- everything! It is interesting how strongly we cling to this world, how difficult it is for us to let go. But the truth is, heaven comes only once earth passes away.
2. ***And the sea was no more*** -- in the ancient world the sea was a symbol of chaos. We often think of the sea as a place to go on vacation. We go down to the beach. But for the ancient world the sea was a frightening place. Terrible storms came from there, monsters lived out in the deeps. The sea was also unpredictable. One moment calm, the next moment stormy. One of the most unpleasant aspects of life here in this world it is unpredictable quality. At one moment we are enjoying the pleasures of life and family but suddenly the phone rings with tragic news. Heaven will not contain this desperately unquieting chaos. Heaven will be a place of serenity and stability.
3. ***And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*** - heaven is described as the beauty of a bride on her wedding day. The book of Revelation is filled with marital imagery. And, in fact, all throughout the Bible God uses marriage imagery to describe his relationship with his people and what heaven will be like. Imagine the desire and excitement of the groom on his wedding day as his bride approaches beautifully clothed. We have to get beyond the rather cynical attitudes of today's world. In the ancient Jewish world promiscuity prior to marriage was largely unknown. For a young Jewish man and woman their wedding day and wedding night would be the first time they could be together an intimate. Hence the wedding day was truly a time of deep desire and excitement regarding the communion they would enjoy. God permits us to think of heaven in this way. We will enjoy a deep and fulfilling communion with God, not in a sexual way of course, but in even deeper, more joyful, and desirable communion. God allows for the intimacy of the marriage act to symbolize this far more satisfying communion we will one day enjoy with him.
4. ***And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them"*** - as we already remarked in the notes above the heart of heaven is to be with God! Think not so much of mansions and pearly gates and streets of gold, rather, think of being with God in a deep rapturous communion. We will be swept up into a praise filled place of exquisite beauty where we will enjoy deep communion with God and with one another in God. Heaven is to be with God! God and God alone would be the joy of our eternal home. He will be are one desire, our hearts will never tire of God and God alone.
5. ***He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall their be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away*** - not only will we enjoy the unspeakable joy of being with God but we will also know that the sorrows of earth are long past, never to afflict us again. Regret and sorrows like tears will be wiped from our eyes, there will be no more fear and anxiety, no more pain. And, unlike the brief and passing joys we

experienced on earth only to see them replaced with a new round of challenges and pain, this joy will last forever. The former things that cause pain and grief and sorrow have passed away!

6. ***And he who set upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."*** - we all have had the experience of the excitement over a new car, or some new gadget. Even more the excitement over a newborn baby. But all too soon our excitement over the newness can pass away and become boredom. But in heaven this excitement over the newness of all things, this delight over something new, will never pass away. The terrible affliction of boredom will never afflict again. Notice too, the God says he will make all things new. At the end of time when Jesus comes again in glory the earth and the universe will not be destroyed but rather, gloriously transformed it renewed. They will be restored to their original perfection and perhaps, receive even greater glory. Everything will be new, everything will be renewed. God and God alone created all these things we call our own; from the mighty to the small the glory in them all is God's and God's alone.
7. ***Also he said, "write this, 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."*** - God is our beginning in our end. We were made for God! We were made to know God love him and serve him and be with him forever. God is our all and all. To say that God is our end, our Omega means that he is our destination, our fulfillment, our perfection.
8. ***To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment -*** Again, notice the image: thirst and the satiation out of that thirst. Try to remember a time when you were really thirsty, dehydrated. How wonderful that water felt as it rushed to fill the spaces that the thirst created! Here is a symbol of all our desires and cravings. Think of the joy and satisfaction that will be created as God himself satisfies all our desires, all our thirsts, all our cravings.
9. ***He who conquered shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*** - Notice that in order to receive the incredible blessings we have been meditating upon we must conquer. By God's grace we must persevere. We must overcome temptation and remain faithful. For now there is a battle to wage. But just like the soldier who willingly fights because he knows what is at stake we fight on. Just like the athlete who has his mind fixed on the prize we too discipline ourselves and train for glory. Remember, we are meditating on the joys of heaven not just to have a pleasant experience but to stir ourselves up for the battle that is at hand. We keep our eyes on the prize knowing that the victory comes only after the battle, a crown comes only after the cross. What a prize, what a victory heaven will be. *O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold, Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old, And win with them the victor's crown of gold. Alleluia! And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear a distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong, Alleluia. The golden evening brightens in the West, soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest, sweet is the calm paradise most blest, Alleluia.*

10. ***But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, they're a lot shall be in the lake that Burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.*** - Whoops, where did this verse come from! We are having such a nice time meditating upon heaven and suddenly God mentions hell. But remember, God loves us too much to avoid telling us the truth. It is appropriate, when meditating on the joy and beauty of heaven, to remember what a terrible loss it would be were we not to inherit it. The Lord warns of certain behaviors here that can exclude us from the kingdom of heaven. We should not consider it an exhaustive list but rather as a representative list. Cowards do not inherit the kingdom. At one level this means those who, in order to receive blessings from the world, turned away from the gospel and rejected Christ. But at another level, a coward is any one who refuses to take up the cross and follow Jesus. People who reject the cross by refusing to resist temptation for example, or those who never confront evil, who preferred to remain popular and well liked rather than to risk any self harm that might come from speaking the truth. The faithless are those who did not keep faith, the polluted are those who refuse to seek cleansing forgiveness for their sins, those who made light of their sins or declared them not to be sins at all; these are the polluted. Fornicators are those who indulge in sexual promiscuity. Please note many people make light of this sin today but it is very serious to God. If you have relatives or friends who are promiscuous warn them! Heaven is too great a blessing to lose! The sorcerers are those who invoke elemental spirits or demonic spirits for self-serving and magical purposes. Idolaters are those who placed something else on the throne that belongs to God alone. Liars are those who do not speak the truth about God and what he has revealed. Rather, they spread lies and heresy. None of these sinners shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. As we said the first night, we need to sober up. Sin is serious and it renders us incapable of being in communion with God both now and in eternity. As beautiful and joyful as heaven is, hell is just as desperate and awful at the other extreme. There is emptiness in a fire of limitless desire with no hope of satisfaction. Rather than being fully alive souls in Hell are half dead. They burn with indignation have longings that will never be satisfied and are ultimately frustrated because they cannot attain the end for which they were really made: to be with God. They don't want God but they need him
11. ***Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."*** - Again, notice the marriage imagery here. The Church is Jesus' bride as we see elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Ephesians 5). Jesus is the groom, his Church is the bride. Heaven is like a marriage, a good marriage of deep communion and intimacy with God and his bride.
12. ***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, <sup>11</sup>having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup>It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; <sup>13</sup>on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south***

*three gates, and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup>And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup>And he who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. <sup>16</sup>The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; and he measured the city with his rod, twelve thousand stadia;<sup>ε</sup> its length and breadth and height are equal. <sup>17</sup>He also measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits by a man's measure, that is, an angel's. <sup>18</sup>The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. <sup>19</sup>The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, <sup>20</sup>the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. <sup>21</sup>And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.* - the bride is described with exquisite beauty. Heaven, which is the communion of God and his bride is a beautiful place! There are too many details to look at each of them individually but note some of the elements below:

- a. It may seem a bit confusing reading this passage. What or who exactly is being described? The bride is beautiful but the description seems to be more about heaven rather than the bride. A place is described more than a person and yet this place is called a bride. Here we have to confront one of our distorted notions about heaven. Heaven is not so much a place as it is a communion with God, a marriage union. Heaven is a place to be sure but the heart of heaven is to be with God. Heaven is a place where God is at one with his church. Hence, the bride and groom together is heaven. Heaven is the communion. The physicality of the place is quite secondary. Hence the bride that is described here is at once the Church and also heaven: the Church, (the bride), with her God.
- b. Notice that the word "like" appears quite frequently in this passage. The bride has the glory of God which is "like" a Jewel, "like" precious stones like gold. The point in using this word "like" is that the glory cannot really be compared to any earthly glory. It far surpasses any earthly glory or beauty. The Beauty is "like" a gold or precious stones but it far surpasses them!
- c. Heaven is a high wall - city walls in the ancient world signified safety. The walls were not to keep people in them but to keep enemies out. Heaven is a protected place. The foundation of the wall is that of the apostles themselves.
- d. Heaven has 12 gates and these gates face in all four directions of the compass. Heaven is open to all who will accept the invitation to God's kingdom and choose to live in the righteousness of that kingdom. No one is excluded. God is open to every part of the world. Jesus had sent them to every nation to some of the nations to say. The 12 tribes of Israel now include every nation: *From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,*

*And singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost:  
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

- e. The city is quite large and spacious. It is 1800 miles wide in each direction and 1800 miles tall! The fact that it is foursquare is a symbol of perfection. Don't become too literal and try to imagine a giant cube. The point is that the city which is heaven is beautiful, spacious, magnificent!
13. ***And I saw no Temple in the city, for his Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*** - since heaven is communion with God, God is everywhere. There is no need for a Temple because all of heaven is a Temple, a place where God dwells in all his splendor with his bride.
14. ***In the city has no need of Sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and the lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk...and there shall be no night there.*** This city is not lit from above by the sun or the moon but from within by the very presence of God. There are no shadows, for God is present everywhere. People who have been saved out of every nation shall walk in communion with God and enjoy the light of his presence. Never shall this light be extinguished, there shall be no darkness that comes with night for God is always present to his bride and she to him.
15. ***But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who were written in the Lamb's book of life.*** - Here again is a sobering declaration that we must be capable of entering heaven. Christ is our only hope of ever being able to enter. Only by his precious blood can we be perfected and washed clean. Think about it for a minute, if it were possible for an imperfect human being to enter heaven, heaven would not be heaven! Rather, prior to entering heaven we must be made perfect by the blood of Jesus. We must have every tear wiped from our eyes. We cannot bring with us any sorrow any regrets, any sinful habits, any lack of perfection. These things must be purged from us prior to our entering heaven. Ideally this purging takes place fully here on earth. But realistically, most of us will probably need some purification after death. It is a text like this that causes the Church to teach of the reality of purgatory. Purgatory is that place or process wherein those who die in friendship of God are purified of the last vestiges of sin, and have tears wiped from their eyes, and the sorrows are regrets removed. Whether this process takes time and exactly how it happens is not clear but that it must happen is set forth in a text like this. *Sign me up for the Christian Jubilee, write my name on the roll! I have been changed since the Lord has lifted me, I want to be ready when Jesus comes!* Notice how this old song equates having our name in the Lamb's book of life with having been changed, that is to say, having been cleansed and perfected.
16. ***Then he 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; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*** - The grace and favor of God flow freely through the streets of heaven giving constant life and fruit to all who live there. There is a kind of reminder of the garden in the book of Genesis here. Once again, the human family

is at one with its God and they can walk with God in the garden and enjoy his company. Paradise is restored and even greater than it ever was!

17. ***There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.*** There is a great liturgy going on in heaven that is described in greater detail in Revelation Chapters 4 and 5. The text here says merely that they servants of God worship him but oh what a mighty liturgy it is! The Saints must surely be having church up there! They look upon the face of God which is a biblical way of saying they enjoy very special intimacy with God. All their longings are fulfilled as they gaze upon the beauty of God. The book of Psalms says, "*My heart within me says, is your face the Lord I seek, hide not your face from me!*" (Psalms 27:8) Now is fulfilled the longing of the heart to see the face of the Lord. That his name is on their foreheads is a Jewish way of saying that God is always on their mind. They are in living conscious contact with God at every moment.
18. ***and they shall reign for ever and ever*** - to be in heaven is to conquer, to reign with God. To share his glory! And this shall be forever.