

The Holy City, New Jerusalem

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“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3).

The book of Revelation is special to the New Church. When understood in its internal sense, it presents a vivid picture of why and how the New Church came into existence. It also presents a picture of what we who aspire to be members of that church need to look to in what we care about, think about, and do. This sermon will focus on the picture of the New Church as a radiant city descending from heaven, which represents the qualities that the church should evolve toward in our own lives.

The whole book of Revelation, when properly understood, helps us to see the Lord as a loving God who is reaching out to people and calling them to Him. It helps us to see the importance of understanding what is true and good. It helps us to see the nature of evil and its influence on religious people. And it helps us to see the way the Lord’s kingdom can be, in heaven *and* on earth.

The final chapters of the book of Revelation present a wonderful description of the New Jerusalem. This heavenly city is a picture of the Lord’s church, both as it exists among all people who receive Him and also as it can be with each individual human being. It is the picture of the church that we want to look toward becoming ourselves. So let us examine its qualities and see how they differ from what we sometimes find ourselves inclining to or even actually thinking and doing.

The New Jerusalem comes from no other source than the Lord. It is not a product of keen human intelligence. It is not the result of doing a certain number of good deeds. It is, fundamentally, a quality that a person’s heart receives from the Lord as he or she works to understand and live according to the Lord’s Word. Certainly, we have our own role in receiving this life. John compares the city to a bride adorned for her husband. When you picture a woman preparing for her wedding, don’t you imagine her taking more care with each detail of her preparation than she would at any other time in her life? Don’t you picture her planning out each step in order? This preparation is not done from fear, nor from a self-absorbed focus. Rather it comes from her desire to represent the importance of her relationship to her bridegroom. We prepare for our relationship with the Lord through taking the ideas and implications of His Word into our thoughts and deeds. How haphazard are we about this preparation? Is it like that of a bride adorning herself for her wedding? Is it that important to us?

The Light of the City

The New Jerusalem is described as “...having the glory of God. And her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal” (Revelation 21:11). One of the important qualities that the Lord wants for the New Church is that we understand His Word. He does not

want us to live in blind obedience to rules that don't make any sense to us at all. He does not want us to be befuddled about who He is, about how He is a presence and powerful force within our daily lives, or about how we can cooperate with Him. Certainly there will always be things that are hard for us to understand because of our finite perspective. And we should not expect that doctrinal understanding will help us see why some specific tragedy has occurred. We will still need to have a faith or trust in the Lord's love and wisdom even when our eyes or thoughts don't easily recognize that love or wisdom. But we are supposed to grow in understanding about the Lord's will and presence. We are to worship a visible God. This means that we will come to see the Lord's presence more and more in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in the events of this world. This cannot occur without learning about Him and what He asks of us, reflecting on its specific meaning in our own lives, and then trying to live according to this understanding.

Learning facts about the Lord is not enough. Neither is insight during moments of reflection, which are distant from the daily ups and downs that characterize this world. We need to learn, we need to see the personal meaning of this knowledge, and we need to act from it. If we do this, our lives will be seen by the angels as having a light that is "like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal."

The Wall

The holy city has a wall that is described as great and high. For many this implies protection against dangerous enemies. But that idea is in conflict with the fact that the gates of the city are constantly open in all directions. The wall is not so much an image of protection against enemies as it is a definition of what is true and good. It is a picture of the clear boundaries that we place on what we will think, say and do. These boundaries come from recognizing that the Lord has told us in His Word about the kind of life that He wants to lead us toward. The strength of these "walls" comes from our being able to call up from memory specific words and sentences that we have learned from the Word. The boundaries define what we will and won't do—in work, friendships, marriage, and family. It stops us from saying hurtful things and from harboring thoughts of revenge. It helps us define what it means to justly, faithfully, and honestly do the work that the Lord places before us each day.

The Gates

The gates of city were twelve pearls, each one made from a single pearl. We are told that this signifies that "...the acknowledgment and knowledge of the Lord conjoins into one all the knowledges of truth and good, which are from the Word, and introduces into the church" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 916). So the twelve gates of the city, three for each direction of the compass, represent all the ideas of what is true and good through which a person is introduced into the church (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 899). These ideas vary tremendously in degree and "are for those who are more or less in the love or the affection of good, and for those who are more or less in wisdom or the affection of truth" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 901).

One of the challenges that we human beings tend to face could be represented by a city with only one gate. At some point, we can get stuck on the idea that our view of an issue is the only right one. We can close our minds off to considering other ideas and other values that might have an

important contribution to make toward a wise decision. We can do this by rejecting the validity of others' opinions or by rigidly fixing our own minds on the one and only right way—even when the Lord is working to help us see the limitations of that view. The Lord's church in our lives should have an openness in all directions to understand what is good and true from the Lord. This openness is not an *acceptance* of every idea that comes down the road, but rather a *willingness to consider* its possible legitimacy and value.

The Foundations

The twelve foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with twelve different kinds of precious stones. We are told that these signified

all things of that doctrine in their order from the sense of the letter of the Word, with those who immediately approach the Lord and live according to the commandments of the Decalogue by shunning evils as sins, for these and no others are in the doctrine of love to God and love toward the neighbor, which two are the fundamentals of religion (Apocalypse Revealed 915).

With all the complexity and breadth of knowledge that has been revealed for the New Church, it is absolutely essential that we keep in mind the two fundamentals of religion, which can be stated quite simply. If we are to be grateful for any qualities that have a growing presence in our lives, they should be our love of the Lord and our love toward our neighbor.

No Temple

As John describes the New Jerusalem, he observes, “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Revelation 21:22). We might imagine that this holy city would have a magnificent house of worship. But the reason why it does not demonstrates a problem that can occur with external expressions of worship and good such as church buildings. In this world it takes regular effort to keep external forms from becoming a focus in themselves. For example, many people are quite capable of saying the Lord's prayer and giving it no more thought than they do to the basics of walking. It can become a series of sounds, made without any conscious reflection on their meaning. This is an external form without any internal. Yet we are told concerning the New Church that “...in this church there will not be any external separated from the internal, because the Lord Himself in His Divine Human, from whom is the all of the church, is alone approached, worshiped, and adored” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 918).

At times we benefit significantly from compelling ourselves to go through external forms even when, at that moment, we do not have an appropriate internal of understanding and will. But while we do such things, we are called to approach the Lord and ask for that internal—to pray for understanding and for the love that can properly motivate the external act we are currently doing mostly from obedience. This is why there was no temple in the New Jerusalem, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”

The River and the Tree

In the New Jerusalem there was a river of the water of life. This represents the breadth and depth

of truth that is available from the Lord to those who seek it from a desire to live a good life. Near the end of the final chapter of Revelation we read, “And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (22:17). We are told that these words mean that “...he who desires truths should pray that the Lord may come with light; and that he who loves truths will then receive them from the Lord without labor of his own” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 956).

In that city there is also the tree of life. This is the same tree that is described early in Genesis as being at the center of the Garden of Eden. The tree of life is unusual in that it bears not one kind of fruit but twelve. This represents all the good qualities and actions that will flow from our lives because of the church within us. And the leaves of the tree are described as being for the healing of the nations. These leaves represent the sensible and understandable ideas we have learned from the Lord, which we can share with friends and acquaintances to help them lead better lives. Even when the source of these ideas is completely unknown, they too can help others become wiser and more useful people.

The heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, is a picture of the Lord’s church—both as it exists among all people who receive Him and also as it can be with each human being. It is the picture of the church that we want to look toward becoming ourselves. May we dedicate ourselves to receiving that church, daily approaching the Lord with the prayer that it may descend ever more completely into in our hearts, minds and lives.
Amen.

Lessons: Revelation 21:1-4, 9-26; *Apocalypse Revealed* 956