

Come, Receive the Water of Life

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Revelation 22:1-21

Well, we've come to the end of the book of Revelation. I've enjoyed getting deeper into the meaning of the various images. It's been just like viewing an art gallery full of paintings, some with various possible interpretations. Some of the themes we've observed are how God is the one in control, not emperors and worldly leaders, and how the faithful have victory through enduring suffering and remaining faithful even if it means death, just as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was faithful even to death on a cross. The image of Jesus as a sacrificed lamb is a central one. The faithful followers are present right until the end of time. We've seen how the book of Revelation is full of contrasting images of good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan. The faithful are not whisked away in order to avoid any suffering. Instead, they are given strength to endure various trials. On the other hand, those who go against God's ways end up suffering greatly, often as a natural result of their sin. We also see how God graciously limits the misery of those who are unfaithful, how God continues to reach out, and how God is always ready to forgive. I find it very interesting that here in the final chapter of Revelation, we read that outside the gates of the heavenly city are "the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (v.15). Those who try to make a literal timeline out of Revelation will have many challenges with parts of Revelation such as this. In earlier chapters, the unfaithful people are said to be destroyed, but according to this section they are still somewhere outside the city gates. They are invited to repent, and turn to Jesus so they can enter the heavenly city. In the previous chapter we read that the gates will always be open. It's like an open invitation for people to come. No one is ever forced, because God values our freewill.

Let's look at this final chapter. Two of the main images are the river of the water of life, and the tree of life. These are images of heaven, God's new kingdom on earth, where sin and death are no more. The water of life is "bright as crystal," meaning it is perfectly pure. What might it look like? An artist has imagined it this way...<River of life>. The water flows from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the main street of the city. The source of all life is God, and Jesus Christ (as represented by the Lamb). We read the words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." This is the third time we have God or Christ declaring this in Revelation. Nothing is outside of God's reign. Since death is abolished, life continues eternally, as represented by the river, which continues flowing. With the river being at the centre, it symbolizes that the water of life is available for all people.

<Tree of life1> What might the tree of life look like? The tree of life brings us back to Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve. After disobeying God and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they are banned from the garden since they may end up eating from the tree of life. If that were to happen, they'd live forever in a state of sin. But now, in Revelation, once sin and death are no more, the tree of life is available to everyone. <tree of life2> I like the green in these pictures. It reminds me of new life. <end photos> As we look at the description of the tree, notice that there are 12 kinds of fruit. This is another symbol of the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 Apostles of Jesus, which has now expanded to include believers across the world. The leaves of the tree of life are "for the healing of the nations." In the book of Revelation, "the nations" usually refers to Babylon, those who follow the beast. We go the way of the nations whenever we follow the way of greed, whenever we are self-centred, whenever we fail to care for people around us. In this heavenly paradise, the tree of life represents healing from the effects of our past sins. We are from the nations that need healing.

It's significant that in verse four we read "they will see [God's] face." Usually, if anyone sees God's face, they would die. Even Moses, a person who had maybe the closest relationship with God, was only allowed to see God's back. At the end of time, we will all finally be able to see God face to face and live.

Continuing on, the symbol of having the name of God or Jesus on our foreheads means we belong to God rather than having the mark of the beast. Traditionally, in Israel, the high priest would have “Holy to the Lord” written on his forehead. In a similar way, it was also symbol of allegiance to God.

In verse seven, Jesus says, “See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” In this chapter, “I am coming soon” is repeated three times. “Soon” could also mean “suddenly.” In other words, it will happen without warning. We are to be ready for Christ to come again at any time. In a number of Bible passages it says that he will come “like a thief in the night.” No one can predict the day of his coming. So, we are encouraged to be ready through repentance and following Jesus.

It’s interesting that John again falls down to worship at the feet of the angel who is sharing this vision with him, just as he did in chapter 19. And, just like the first time, the angel scolds John for this action. He must worship only God. This part reminds us that one of the main themes of Revelation is a warning against idolatry. We must never substitute things or people for God.

Now, at the end of Revelation we come back to the churches mentioned near the beginning of the book. This makes sense, since Revelation was written as a letter from Jesus to seven different churches. John, the writer, receives this message from Jesus who was both human and divine. As a “descendant of David,” Jesus’ humanity is emphasised. As “the bright morning star,” Jesus’ divinity is also emphasised. In ancient times, there were no copyright laws and it wasn’t easy to keep writings pure. At the end of their letters, writers would often declare curses on those who might distort their message by adding or changing parts. In a similar way, Revelation ends with a warning against those who may add to it or take parts away.

I’d like to spend some time now focusing on the invitation in verse 17. It’s an invitation to turn from our own sin and come to Jesus. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” We all have reasons why we may hesitate to accept this gift. Some may feel like saying, “Oh, I’m OK. I think I may be good enough without needing any help.” They may think, “Oh thank-you, I’ll do all I can to be worthy.” But, the water of life can only be accepted as a gift. If young children offer to pay their parents for feeding them, it would be insulting to the parents. How would God feel if we even attempt to pay back anything for God’s gift of love, and God’s forgiveness of our sin? It would be as if we’ve received 100 million dollars as a gift and think we can then offer our 10 dollars in an attempt to start paying it back. We can only respond with worship and thanksgiving, knowing that Jesus did what none of us can do. The gift is not based on our goodness. It isn’t based on how much we pray or go to church. It isn’t even based on our decision to follow Jesus! (Although, our acceptance of Jesus opens our heart to receiving it). This gift is based on Jesus’ death on a cross for our sin, and his resurrection. Jesus made the way for us. Notice that the water of life is a gift for “anyone who wishes.” But, do we wish for it? It’s tougher for those who are fairly content with their lives. Those who have enough to eat, have a place to live, have their own computer or smartphone may not realise their need for Jesus. Or, we may fear the unknown. Can I trust the God of the Bible? Can I really trust that what the Bible says about Jesus is true?

“The Silver Chair” is a book from the chronicles of Narnia series. Author C.S. Lewis tells the story of an encounter between Jill and Aslan the lion. Aslan is standing near a stream, and Jill is very, very thirsty, but is afraid to go to the water because Aslan looks quite scary. If she were to come closer, would the lion eat her? <lion photo>

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion.

“I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill.

“Then drink,” said the Lion.

“May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.

“The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. ...

“I daren’t come and drink,’ said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,’ said the Lion.

“Oh, dear!’ said Jill, coming another step nearer. ‘I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.’

“There is no other stream,’ said the Lion.” <end photos>

Aren’t we sometimes like Jill in our hesitation to come close to God and accept the invitation to come and drink at the river? There is no other river. It is only through Jesus that we can receive the water of life. May we all follow the invitation to regularly come and drink from the source. Let’s pray.

Loving God, thank-you for your word in the Bible. Reading Revelation, we’ve encountered so many different wild images. So many parts are not easy to understand. Thank-you for scholars who have studied and learned what the world was like in the time that John wrote Revelation. Thank-you for the insights we gain through this deep research. O Lord, thank-you for the message of hope you give us through Revelation. We need not fear evil because you are in control. Thank-you! Loving God, because of your Son, Jesus we can now freely drink from the water of life. Thank-you! It’s amazing that all that is required is for us to come to you. Grant us the courage to let go of the things that distract us, and to come to you. O Lord, you challenge us to let go of our self-centredness. But, in opening our hearts, as we keep returning to you, may we receive healing in our souls. Through Christ we pray, Amen.