

WHAT WAS LOST IS RETURNED

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 21:9–22:5
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When my children were little, they each had a special stuffed animal. My wife and I purchased two of each so that if we ever lost one, we could replace it. We would rotate them out when they got dirty until, inevitably, our kids saw both of the toys at the same time. From then on, they each had two favorite stuffed animals.

Imagine a little girl with her favorite stuffed animal. She carries it everywhere she goes. It means the world to her. The stuffed animal represents safety and love and fun and happiness. But then one day, she loses the toy. No matter where she looks, she can't find it. The stuffed animal that had been her constant companion for years is gone.

The little girl feels empty without the toy. Nothing else fits in her arms quite like that stuffed animal used to. She falls asleep at night as her arms clutch nothingness. Eventually, the little girl grows up. She goes to school, gets married, and has children of her own. But she still can't shake the feeling that something is missing. Even as an adult, she falls asleep with hands grasping a toy she can't find.

This little girl's story is our story. All of us have lost something. We spend our lives looking for it. Companies are built, technologies are developed. A vast amount of money is spent in search of this item that we have lost. The truth is that it is within God's power to return it to us. But he doesn't. Not yet.

Not until the passage we encounter today. Today is our second to last week in our study of the book of Revelation which we've called "Wake Up." This is one of the things I've loved about studying Revelation and the Bible in general: the words in this book make sense of what I feel inside. They offer a story which helps to explain why I long for justice and love and beauty and relationship and life

When we looked at Revelation 21 last week, we saw God unveiling the new heavens and the new earth. We recognized this as the ultimate goal throughout

Revelation. God has been clearing the world of evil to prepare for his new creation. I suggested that this new creation is what we've always wanted.

This morning, we'll take that idea one step further. As we read more details about the New Jerusalem, we'll discover something powerful. We'll discover that this new city isn't just what we've always wanted; it's something we used to have. But we lost it long ago, and we've been looking for it ever since. Today we'll see what was lost is returned.

Sigmund Freud is often credited as being the founder of modern psychoanalysis. In Freud reflected:

I believe now that I was never free from a longing for the beautiful woods near our home, in which... I used to run off from my father, almost before I had learnt to walk.¹

Freud longed for the beautiful woods near his boyhood home. A place he used to know. I think Freud felt something more profound than a simple connection to his childhood. He was feeling something as ancient as time itself. This morning, we'll see those trees that Freud longed for.

Our passage this morning describes the New Jerusalem. This city in the new heavens and the new earth is used as a symbol of what our eternity will resemble. We'll look at the passage in three parts. First, we'll see the introduction to the New Jerusalem. Then we'll hear about the architecture of the city. Finally, we'll hear about the landscaping of the city.

We're going to see how this passage alludes to two distinct places in the Old Testament that have been off-limits to God's people for a very long time. But here, in eternity, what was restricted has now been opened. What was lost to us will be returned.

As we long for this future God has in store for us, we can recognize the hints God gives us now to point us there. We can taste this future now, and that helps us to wait for it passionately.

Introduction to the New Jerusalem

As with so many of the passages in Revelation, this one begins with an angel showing John a dramatic vision.

Revelation 21:9-11:

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." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

We recognize this angel. Revelation 17 also describes one of the seven angels with the bowls carrying John away. In that chapter, John was brought to a wilderness and shown a woman on a scarlet beast. She represented the city of Babylon, which was judged for its evil. Now John is carried away to a high mountain to view the new Jerusalem. This is the city of God's people.

One commentator called the book of Revelation "A tale of two cities." The overarching story of Revelation is how the perfect city of God's Jerusalem replaces the evil cities of the earth.

We are told that this new city of Jerusalem is the bride, the wife of the Lamb. But we've already met the wife of the Lamb. We met her in Revelation 19. In that chapter, we were told that the bride of Christ is the people of God. So the bride is the wife of the Lamb is the people of God is the New Jerusalem.

John sees a city, but the city represents something else: the people of God. A city is made by its people. The new Jerusalem is a symbol for the people who might occupy such a city.

It's impossible to understate the importance of Jerusalem to God's people in the first century. I was in Jerusalem a few months ago. Even today, when you stand in the city, you can't ignore how important it is to everyone. That city feels like the center of the world.

For God's people to see the New Jerusalem prepared for them meant one thing: this is home. This is where you belong. This is your home and your people.

We may not feel that way about Jerusalem, but this symbol describes our perfect home. We have a place where we belong. We're just not there yet. So for now, we long for home.

Several years ago, I visited the house where I grew up in Connecticut. I knocked on the door and looked around inside. I enjoyed seeing the place where I had grown up; to remember mowing the lawn, playing basketball in the driveway, and climbing the hill above our property. All of that life lived there.

It was great to remember. But this place was no longer home. Whatever quality this place used to have which labeled it home within me was gone.

Some of you have moved here from other places—other parts of the U.S. or other parts of the world even. This place doesn't feel like home. When you go back home, there's something lost there as well.

That's good. It reminds us that if we are followers of Jesus, we live in a different kingdom. We do not belong entirely to this world. That's why Peter says in 1 Peter 2:11, "I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul."

This place is not our home, so don't get caught up in the things of this world, which only tend to draw us back into a false sense of belonging to here.

The author of Hebrews extends this idea to speak of the day when we will be welcomed home. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14).

We do not have a lasting city here. That should have made been clear over and over again in the book of Revelation. We have seen the cities of this world—the great city of Babylon which symbolized Rome and for us refers to the Silicon Valley; we have seen those cities judged and destroyed. The city of man will not last. Those people who tie themselves to the beast of Babylon end up suffering the same fate.

But followers of Jesus seek the city that is to come. We long for the home that this New Jerusalem represents. But what will this city be like? What makes it so perfect? Our passage continues to describe the architecture and the landscape of this city.

The Architecture of the New Jerusalem

As you read this passage, see if you can find the number theme.

Revelation 21:12-17:

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— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement.

There are lots of twelves: the walls, the gates, and the foundations, all in different combinations.

It may help to think about what defined an ancient city. Most of what made a city were the walls. Otherwise, it was just land. The purpose of having a city was to create a place where people could gather together and be protected. For that you needed walls. To build walls, you needed foundations in the ground. The walls kept people out. But you had to be able to let some people in. For that, you needed gates.

This New Jerusalem has twelve foundations which are named for the New Testament apostles. It also has twelve gates which are named for the Old Testament tribes. If a city is defined by its walls, this city is defined by the tribes of Israel and the apostles of Jesus. This is the collected people of God.

The New Jerusalem is a strange kind of city. The city is laid out in a square, but it's actually a cube; its length and width and height are equal. The measurement for each of those is around 1400 miles. That's an enormous city.

The city would be so tall it would stretch well outside of the earth's atmosphere. So we have to remember: this is symbolic imagery. The city is a symbol for the people of God.

The design starts to make sense when you realize that the only other architectural cube in the Bible is the Holy of Holies from 1 Kings 6:20. That was the special place in the center of the temple that no one ever entered. Only the high priest could enter and only once per year.

Verses 19-20 describe twelve different jewels which adorned the foundation of the city. For the most part, those are the same jewels used to fashion the breastplate that Aaron, the first priest, wore. Aaron wore that breastplate when he went into one particular place: the Holy of Holies.

This New Jerusalem is not a typical city. The whole city is, in a sense, the new Holy of Holies. This is where God is. This is a physical place that somehow carries the concentrated presence of God in a way that no other place does.

The Holy of Holies was off-limits. But not in the New Jerusalem. And it's not just that we will finally get to enter the Holy of Holies. We don't live in the New Jerusalem. We *are* the New Jerusalem. We become the Holy of Holies, along with all the other followers of Jesus across time and space. We become the place where God's presence is focused in a concentrated way.

That's the perfect city. The city where God dwells. The perfect city would have certain qualities, but there are also things you'd want that city not to have. That's what is described in Revelation 21:22-27.

Revelation 21:22-27:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

The city has no temple because God is already there. The city needs no sun or moon because God is its light source. The gates of the city are never shut because the nations are welcome, except for those people who don't want to live in God's presence—the kinds of people you don't want in a perfect city; the kinds of people who

oppress and destroy and lie and do evil. God doesn't let them into his presence because this city is perfect.

The perfect city of God's perfect presence awaits us. This is what we long for when we long for home. We long for God's presence.

Do you realize that God is here now? This promise is not only for the future. We experience this in part, even now. God is with us here in the space that we occupy, and not only in a theological or philosophical sense. God is here. The person of God is in this room. This is one of the primary attributes of God. He is omnipresent. He exists everywhere.

Worship to God in song can be very powerful because of God's omnipresence. Music has a way of helping us to perceive things which our intellect has a harder time grasping. When we worship, we attune ourselves to God's presence. He is here. When we come together in worship, we are training ourselves to pay attention—to notice and enjoy his real presence.

When we come together, we are preparing ourselves for eternity when we'll live in the presence of God. The Holy of Holies was given as a place where God's presence could be uniquely experienced. If God is everywhere, he isn't any more present in the Holy of Holies—the degree of his presence doesn't change, but our awareness changes. Worship shapes us to be more aware of his presence.

In the New Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies will be opened up for all of us to experience God's presence. In the last section of our passage, we go even farther back in the Old Testament to a place more off-limits, where not even one person goes every year.

We find that place not in the architecture of the New Jerusalem, but in its landscaping.

The Landscape Of The New Jerusalem

Now we arrive at one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. It combines two powerful images from the Old Testament into an incredible picture of what the new Jerusalem will be like.

Revelation 22:1-5:

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 2 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. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 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.

Almost 700 years before the book of Revelation was written a priest named Ezekiel saw a similar prophecy of a new city. One of the most striking features of what he saw was a river. This river seeped out from under the door of the temple but grew broader and deeper as it moved toward the Dead Sea. What was remarkable about this river was that when it arrived at the Dead Sea, it made that water fresh. The saltiest water in the world, made fresh by water with its source in the presence of God.

The river in the middle of the New Jerusalem takes that image and combines it with one more surprise: a tree that granted the ones who ate from it life forever; a tree that has been off-limits to us for a very, very long time.

In the original garden which God created in Genesis 1-2, the tree of life stood in the center. As the story is told, Adam and Eve ate freely from this tree. But then they disobeyed God and ate from a different tree—the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because of that broken trust and the sin that entered their lives, God banished them from the garden. Listen to God's reasoning:

Genesis 3:22-23:

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” 23 therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

God imagines Adam and Eve eating from the tree of life and living forever in their state of sin. But he can't finish his sentence. He trails off. The idea of an eternity of sinful life is too much to bear. So God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden and stations an angel with a flaming sword to guard the way back to the tree of life.

I'm convinced that something deep inside of me has been longing to get back to that tree. I experience disappointment or frustration or loneliness or boredom and it's all tied back to the tree of life. I want to live the full life. I want to taste of the tree of life.

And here, finally, what has been off-limits for thousands of years is available. The tree of life is back. We have been returned to the Garden of Eden, but it is an enhanced garden. The tree is on both sides of a river. Its fruit comes every month. And it isn't just for life; it's for healing. The nations—everyone from everywhere with every kind of background imaginable—come to eat its fruit, and to be healed and live forever.

This is the toy that we have lost. In fact, God has been withholding it from us. He has been withholding it not to harm us but to protect us. He wants us to eat from the tree of life. He wants us to live forever in paradise, not hell. Everything that he has done has been in order to restore our access to the tree of life.

You want the most out of life. You want life eternal. I know you do. Eternal life is a longing deep within us. You were meant to. This is how. Long for the eternal life that God has planned for you.

Trees surround us. From the fruit trees in my backyard to the Redwoods of our coast to the lonely Acacia trees of the African plains to the lush rainforest of South America with its 400 billion trees from 16,000 different species, there's something special about a tree.²

I believe God gives us trees all around us to remind us of the one tree that we long for, the tree that is currently off-limits. The tree that in this passage is made available to all of us.

Several years ago, I spoke for a week at a Christian dude ranch. My theme the entire week was the tree of life. At one point during the week, I talked to the children, and I used the word "tree" as an acronym. T-R-E-E: Terrific Reminders of Eternity Everywhere.

You see a tree almost every day of your life. What if those trees could remind you of the tree that you were meant to eat from for all of eternity? The "one tree to rule them all"—that's the tree of life.

Everyone is trying to beat death. It's the one thing that none of us can escape. We have the smartest people in the world with the most powerful collection of technology and financial resources ever assembled

working day and night to solve the problem of death. All of this is happening here, in Silicon Valley.

But the people who are trying to solve the problem of death won't succeed because there is an angel with a flaming sword guarding the way back to the tree of life. I wonder if it's the same angel who shows John this vision of the New Jerusalem. If I'd been guarding that tree for thousands of years, I'd want to be the one to open the path to it at the end of time.

We know the path to eternal life. Every time you see a tree, remember the tree of life. Remember that if you know Jesus, you are on a path toward that tree. Jesus is the way back to what we have lost.

Conclusion

Remember the little girl we imagined? Remember her lost toy? Remember her falling asleep at night with her hands still clasped around its empty shape? That is us. In this life, we have lost something. We don't have access to the tree of life right now.

But we have seen the future God has promised where all that we ever lost will be returned. The New Jerusalem brings back two powerful places from the Old Testament: The Holy of Holies, where God's presence was experienced in a unique way and the tree of life, which gave eternal life to whoever ate from it.

In the New Jerusalem, we will be the Holy of Holies, and we will eat from the tree of life. We will live in God's presence, and we will live forever and ever. Life will be like the paradise of the Garden of Eden, only better. Redemption is better than perfection. In the New Jerusalem, this will be the life we were always meant to live.

For now, God has given us reminders in our lives. They are reminders because they point back to something we used to have, but they also are hints of what is to come. When we experience God's presence here, we glimpse our eternity. When we see one of the thousands of trees we live among, we can think of the tree of life.

This is one of the biggest challenges of the life of faith: keeping our eyes open to the spiritual reality around us. To wake up and stay awake to God's reality.

Long for home. Long for God's presence. Long for eternal life.

Allow this longing to shape your choices. Every disappointment is a reminder of what we have lost. Every celebration is a taste of what's to come. And every longing for food, sex, drink, companionship, meaning, and achievement points us toward this moment in time. Live with that longing.

Endnotes

¹ Sigmund Freud, in *The Question of God*, Armand Nicholi, Jr., (New York, NY: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, 2002), quoted in Andy Tix. "Longing for More." *Psychology Today*, September 19, 2019. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-peace/201709/longing-more>> (accessed June 2019).

² Mark Riley Cardwell, "Trees of the Amazon rainforest - in pictures," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2013/oct/29/trees-amazon-rainforest-in-pictures>>. (accessed June 2019).