

Church in a New Light

Revelation 21:21-27 (NIV)

²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass. ²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

As we pick up near the end of the book of Revelation, we get a picture of life after the end of the world. Jesus has returned on the Last Day. Everyone has been raised to live and judged. This world, this current heaven and earth, passes away, ends, and there is a new heaven and a new earth where there is no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. The Apostle John sees the holy city comes down, the new Jerusalem, to this new heaven and earth. Revelation chapter 21 is a picture of God dwelling with all his believers, and what a beautiful existence that will be!

Back towards the beginning of 2020, with the support of our elders and our church leadership, we issued what we called "The Great Multitude Challenge." The idea came from Revelation 7:9-10, which we heard a couple of weeks ago: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" There will be worship of God, church, in heaven, and it's going to be a glorious party filled with countless people – kind of like what we saw on Easter Sunday when our sanctuary was filled with people who were worshiping the Lamb who was slain but rose from the dead, cleansing us from all our sins with his blood, clothing us with his pure white perfection, and giving us a sure hope of being raised from the dead and eventually having death destroyed. Through his Word, God has us see our gathering for worship in a new light, as a preview of heaven.

But worship here is only a preview of heaven, not heaven itself. Yes, we love getting together and joining our voices with other believers. Yes, here we get to rejoice and bask in God's agape love, that love that served us, was patient with us, was merciful with us, that removed our sins from us and keeps no record of them, that love that always endures and never ends. However, things are not perfect here, are they?

The beauty of our eternal life with God was described this way: "The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass." (verse 21) Such fine and perfect materials are used in heaven. I like our church building. Hopefully you do too. But at the same time, we can be honest and say that it's not on the same level as this description of heaven. We have relatively new carpet and chairs, but you'll find hairs stuck to the fibers, some melted wax on a couple of them from our Christmas Eve worship services, a few stains here and there, a jelly bean ground into the carpet. When you start to look for them, you see every nick, cut, scrape, imperfection on our walls, places where we painted outside of the lines and got the wrong color on the trim, places where the mud and the tape on the drywall came apart, warped and unfinished windowsills. There are weeds in the cracks of our parking lot and mixed in with our lawn. We have dead patches of grass that will probably get worse this year with the ongoing drought and watering restrictions. Our church building and grounds are not perfect.

But the church is not the building; it's the people, the believers in Christ wherever they gather around the Word of God. Do you see a perfect place here? This is a good place to gather and be around people who worship the Lamb, but we also brought our sin and impurities with us. You've seen it this morning. It was the person that you avoided instead of giving them your time and your ear. It was the false pretense you put on, the one where you said everything is good when it's really not. It was the person that you silently harbored frustration and resentment against because they didn't treat you with the care and attention you felt that they should. It was with the selfish attitude that I came to church for only what I get out of it, not for anyone else. It was with you even before getting to church as your frustration escaped from you when you became impatient for everyone to get ready on time to be here.

We want this church, this gathering of believers, to be a safe place, a place of trust, of forgiveness, of acceptance, but we know that people here sin. We sin against each other. We're selfish. We judge by our standards, not always God's. People get hurt at this church, as they do at any church this side of heaven. I mean, we've been spending time putting together a whole safety plan for the congregation. Why? Because impurity entered through the doors here today. And you know what? The first impure thing to enter the doors today is the one standing before you speaking to you right now. I came here with my sins, my shameful sins that I pray

none of you learn and none of you wrestle with, but I know you have your sins and your wrestles. We are in a room full of sinners who are going to sin against God and sin against each other.

How far short our preview of heaven falls in our gathering here today. How are any of us going to go from this imperfection-filled gather to the heavenly one, the one that God says about dwelling with him that “nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life”? (verse 27) Are we too impure, too sinful, to be with God? Are our names blotted out of the Lamb’s book of life? Will God shut us out of heaven?

Yes, our gathering of Christians here today is a sinful bunch. We are impure, tarnished with sin. We do not deserve to go through the pearly gates and walk those streets of pure gold. But that’s all that Satan wants us to think and feel and see. He wants to keep us in the darkness of our sin, constantly accuse us of all our impurities. We are gathered here today to see things in a new light.

In this Holy City, the Apostle John tells us: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.” (verse 23) There is a new source of light after the world has ended. It’s not the sun, but God himself. What does he see when he illuminates us? He sees us in the new light of the Lamb who was slain for our sins and who rose from the dead. He sees a gathering of people, a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, who are wearing robes washed clean and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

In light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, God sees a perfect gathering of people here today, a perfect church. We are not the impure, sin-tarnished gathering of believers that we see with our eyes, especially as we look in a mirror. In the light of what God has done for us, we are pure and our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

If you ever doubt this or wonder about it as you reflect on yourself and all your sins, look in the new light of the Lamb who was slain for you and rose from the dead. It is in this light that we live and move and have our being. “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.” (verse 24) We live in this world knowing that our sins are taken away, that we have been cleansed, that we stand pure with robes washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

Because we are made pure, God shows us church in a new light. John noted with a bit of surprise, “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” (verse 22) It’s a perfect church without warped window sills or stained carpet or weeds growing in cracks. God is our temple, always with us, never outside of his light. We won’t be coming to church anymore to receive his love through his Word and Sacraments. He will simply be with us with all our spiritual and physical needs completely taken care of. It’s a perfect church.

Because God is our light and he is our temple, we are completely safe. “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.” (verse 25) We won’t need a safety plan in this new light because never again will anyone or any sin threaten or hurt any of us. There will be no more resentment, no more false pretenses, no more lack of patience, only perfect relationships with each other. It’s a completely safe church that needs no guards, no defenses. This gathering of believers in this new light, this church, never ends.

From our preview, we’re back now at our imperfect little church in northern Utah. But see now this gathering in a new light. In the light of the Lamb, we see a group of people who are purified, washed clean in his blood, covered in his perfection, people whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. Thank you, God, for having us see this gathering in a new light, in your light, the light of forgiveness that scatters the darkness of our sins, a light that we will dwell in forever because Christ is risen; he is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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