

Lesson 50

Last week we started looking at Chapter 21, which as we will see contains perhaps the most beautiful description of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Bible. We learned two important things from verse 2 — first, this is not describing the end of the world, and, second, this is not describing heaven. Why not the end of the world? Because in verse 2 we see the church coming down out of heaven, while at the end of the world the church will be delivered up to heaven. And why not a description of heaven? Because whatever we are seeing here is coming down **out of heaven**, which tells us it is not heaven. In fact, it is the church, as we have already seen in the opening verses and will see in greater detail throughout the remainder of the chapter.

Why do we see the church coming down out of heaven? We discussed two reasons. First, that description stresses the divine origin of the church as opposed to Rome, which was pictured as coming up from the earth and from the sea. And second, that description fits with how the church has been described all throughout this book — as already being in heaven while Rome has been referred to as those who dwell upon the earth. Now that Rome has been judged, the church is figuratively shown returning to its new environment on earth.

When we ended we were looking at verse 4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

How can the beautiful promises in verse 4 apply to anything other than the end of the world? We could ask Isaiah that same question because he used similar language to apply to something other than the end of the world. He used similar language to describe a deliverance from Assyria.

Isaiah 25:8 — He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.

*Isaiah 30:19 — For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: **thou shalt weep no more:** he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.*

These promises in Isaiah were intended to emphasize that Israel's past troubles would soon be no more, which is the same way the language is used here in Revelation. Rome had been judged. The figurative language in verse 4 describes the dramatic change in environment experienced by the victorious church.

So **when** will all of the promises in verse 4 occur? **When** will every tear be wiped away? **When** will death be no more? **When** will there be no more crying or pain? **Verse 3 gives us the answer** — these promises will occur when the dwelling of God is with men. So when will that happen? We should ask instead when **did** that happen! God is dwelling with his people today!

Isaiah 2:2 — *And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of **the LORD's house** shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.*

Matthew 18:20 — *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am **I in the midst of them.***

1 Corinthians 3:16 — *Know ye not that ye are **the temple of God**, and that **the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?***

Ephesians 2:19 — *Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of **the household of God.***

Ephesians 2:22 — *In whom ye also are builded together for **an habitation of God through the Spirit.***

1 Timothy 3:15 — *But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in **the house of God**, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*

We are waiting for many things, but dwelling with God is not one of them! That is a blessing we are enjoying right here and right now in the church. Yes, we will enjoy that blessing in a different manner someday, but that does not change the fact that we are enjoying that blessing today. God dwells with his people **now**. Christ's perfect sacrifice made that possible. God dwells in his church, and anyone who persecutes that church will answer to him. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest **thou me?**" (Acts 9:4).

These descriptions concerning crying, tears, pain, and death should not be taken literally. This language is symbolic, and we must consistently treat it as such. Here, as in Isaiah, these descriptions depict the state of God's people after a specific enemy has been removed by God.

But what about the phrase “**no more death**”? Death has played a major role in this book. Death was the primary weapon that Rome used against the church. But when God defeated Rome, God defeated Rome's power to inflict death. Rome would never again have the power of physical death over God's people once Rome was finally removed. But, more importantly, as we saw in the previous chapter, the really important death is not the first death, but is the second death. And the second death awaits only those who are opposed to God; the second death does not await the faithful people of God. Rome could inflict the first death, but Rome had no power over the second death. As we have said, God always has the last word when it comes to death.

But could that same language in verse 4 also be used to describe the end of the world? Yes — and in fact Paul uses it that way in 1 Corinthians.

*1 Corinthians 15:54 — So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, **Death is swallowed up in victory.***

Paul is quoting Isaiah 25:8 there — and that is a verse we read just a moment ago. As we said then, Isaiah 25 is talking about Assyria, but Paul tells us that it applies to the end of the world. What does that tell us? What it tells us is that Isaiah 25 had a **dual fulfillment**. It applied to the current situation in Isaiah 25 involving Assyria (as Isaiah tells us), and it applied to the final judgment at the end of time (as Paul tells us).

We *may* have some dual fulfillments in Revelation just as we do in Isaiah — one fulfillment pointing to Rome and a second fulfillment pointing to the end of the world. The problem is that we can never know for sure that a dual fulfillment is in view unless the inspired text tells us, as it does with Isaiah 25. But that also means that we can't rule out a dual fulfillment. We may be seeing one here for example. Paul tells us that the defeat of death **as to Assyria** had its ultimate fulfillment in the defeat of death at the end of all time. That may also be true of the defeat of death **as to Rome**.

But, and **here is the key point**, the defeat of death was not **only** a yet future event. Christ defeated death at the cross. Yes, death would face another (but very much related) defeat at the end of time as Paul tells us, but Paul also tells us that death was defeated much earlier than that.

*2 Timothy 1:10 — But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who **hath** abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Jesus defeated death by his own death and resurrection. Death has never been the same after the cross!

Verse 4 is describing the **spiritual blessings** of the church — no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, and no pain. Those are spiritual blessings. Yes, we will and we do shed **physical** tears, as did Jesus. Yes, we will and we do experience **physical** pain and **physical** death, as did Jesus. But **spiritually** our situation is very different — even in the midst of that physical suffering. Spiritually, we have no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, and no pain. And that is true here and now. That is true today. Will it also be true in heaven? Absolutely it will be. In fact, **if it is true today while we are still groaning in our earthly tabernacle, how much more will it be true after we have put aside that earthly tabernacle?**

I am not saying that these spiritual blessings don't apply to the church in heaven. What I am saying is that these spiritual blessings don't apply **only** to the church in heaven. They also apply to the church today. Why? Because of what verse 3 tell us — because “the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” That blessing has been enjoyed by the church from the day it was established in Acts 2. The church is the **Lord's house** (Isaiah 2:2). The church is the **household of God** (Ephesians 2:19) and the **habitation of God** (Ephesians 2:22). The church is the **house of God** (1 Timothy 3:15).

My fear is not that we will **apply** these blessings to heaven; my fear is that we will **limit** these blessings to heaven. God wants us to see the church as he sees the church; and God sees the church as his house, as the place where he dwells and lives among his people.

*Ephesians 1:3 — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with **all spiritual blessings** in heavenly places in Christ.*

We have been blessed with all spiritual blessings. Yes, they are blessings in heavenly places, but they are blessings we already have. Paul does not tell us that we **will** be blessed with all spiritual blessings; Paul tells us we **have** been blessed with all spiritual blessings. And what does it mean to have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places? It means no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, and no pain. **Physically** we experience those things, but **not spiritually**.

Revelation 21:5-8

5 And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. 6 And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. 7 He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. 8 But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

Who is on the throne in verse 5? Is it God the Father or God the Son? We don't need to choose. This throne is the same throne we will see in Chapter 22, and there in verse 1 and verse 3 it is described as "the throne of God and of the Lamb." The title "alpha and omega, the beginning and the end" brings us full circle back to the description of Jesus in the opening chapter of the book, where that same phrase was used twice to describe Christ.

"Behold, I make all things new." What a beautiful promise! It points back to first verse of this same chapter where John saw "a new heaven and a new earth." By judging Rome, God created a new environment for his people. But

I think verse 5 is broader than that. I think verse 5 is pointing to a continuing action on the part of God, not just to make a new environment for the church as to Rome, but to do that again and again for the church. And, of course, God does that for us as well.

2 Corinthians 4:16 — *For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.*

2 Corinthians 5:17 — *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

Colossians 3:10 — *And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.*

There is newness in Christ! That was certainly a wonderful promise for the persecuted first century church, but that is a wonderful promise for us as well. We become a new creature when we arise from the waters of baptism.

Romans 6:4 — *Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in **newness** of life.*

Verse 5 also says, “for these words are true and faithful.” In Revelation 3:14, Jesus was described as “the faithful and true witness.” In Revelation 19:11, Jesus was called “Faithful and True.” Here in verse 5 it is not Jesus that is called faithful and true, but rather the words that John has been told to write. But, of course, as John tells us elsewhere, Jesus is the word made flesh (John 1:14). Here we see that same message as the descriptions applied to Christ are also applied to the word of God. Doesn’t that fact alone tell us how we must treat the word of God? When we hold, and read, and study, and proclaim the word of God — we are holding, reading, studying, and proclaiming that which God has described using the same terms with which he describes his only begotten son! We must never treat God’s word lightly or with any attitude other than the greatest reverence. In the next chapter, we will find what awaits those who take away from or add to the word of God.

In verse 6 we are told that “it is done.” What is “it”? What else could it be other than everything we have seen done in the previous verses and chapters of this book? Remember what prompted this book — it was the cry for vengeance in

Revelation 6:10 — “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” The entire book has been an answer to that question, and here in verse 6 the answer is that “it is done.” Rome has been judged, and their blood has been avenged.

“It is done.” That phrase reminds us of the great statement of Jesus from the cross in John 19:30 — “It is finished.” We shouldn’t need a reminder of this fact, but here we have two reminders: **Jesus never fails in what he sets out to accomplish!** The premillennialists would do very well to make note of that fact. Why? Because they falsely teach that Jesus came to this earth to establish his kingdom, but he failed to do so and instead set up the church. We have discussed that false doctrine before, and we could spend many weeks studying it, **but do we really need to look any further at a doctrine to know it is false when that doctrine is based on the idea that Jesus failed to do something that he set out to accomplish?** Is there really a need to study their doctrine further after we hear the words “Jesus failed” come from their lips? I don’t know about you, but that’s when I change the channel!

In verse 6 we see another promise: “I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” This promise reminds us of many verses, one of which we looked at in our study of the book of Zechariah.

***Zechariah 13:1** — In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.*

***Jeremiah 2:13** — For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*

***John 4:14** — But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.*

***John 7:38** — He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

Are we looking at the end of the world here? Again, I ask, how could we be? Will this invitation to the thirsty to drink from the fountain of life remain available after the end of the world? John 4:14 tells us that those who partake

of this water “shall never thirst” (which is yet another **spiritual** blessing). What that means is that the thirsty in verse 6 have not yet partaken of this water, and yet verse 6 is an invitation for them to do so. Will there be such an invitation after the word has come to an end? No, there will not. The door to heaven is open today for all who will enter, but on that last great day that door will close. “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Verse 7 talks about he that overcometh and is another verse that comes full circle back to beginning of the book.

Revelation 2:7 — *To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*

Revelation 2:11 — *He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*

Revelation 2:17 — *To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*

Revelation 2:26 — *And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:*

Revelation 3:5 — *He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.*

Revelation 3:12 — *Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.*

Revelation 3:21 — *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.*

And now here in verse 7: “He that **overcometh** shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.”

If we had to reduce the message of Revelation down to a single word, what would that word be? Perhaps we might choose “victory,” and that would be a very good choice. But perhaps an even better choice would be this word: **Overcome!** As we said when we studied Chapters 2-3, those two chapters provide the all-important context for the vision that follows, and the message of Chapters 2-3 is overcome! The promises and the blessings in this book are for those who overcome, and the judgments in this book are for those who fail to overcome.

But Calvin says that once we are saved, we are always saved. And those who follow Calvin today say that man plays no role at all in his salvation. Is that what Jesus is saying here? Don't we see the command to overcome given seven times in Chapters 2 and 3? Don't we see the wonderful promises in those chapters reserved only for those who overcome? Calvin says we don't need to do anything; Christ says we need to overcome. What is our choice? **Calvin or Christ?** Calvin belongs in the same dustbin in which the faithful first century Christians placed Caesar. Whether the choice is between **Caesar or Christ** or between **Calvin and Christ** — that is no choice at all! “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). And Calvin? What does the Bible say about him? “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:9). If that verse does not apply to John Calvin, then it applies to no one.

Verse 7 is a promise to those who overcome. How do we overcome? John, writing by inspiration, answers that question.

1 John 5:4 — For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

Revelation 12:11 — And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

How do we overcome? We overcome by faith in Christ. We overcome by the blood of Christ. We overcome by the word of Christ. We overcome by faithfulness to Christ unto death.

Verse 8 is for those who fail to overcome. Verse 7 tells us the blessings awaiting those who overcome. Verse 8 tells us what awaits those who fail to overcome: the second death. Again we have come full circle back to the beginning of the book.

Revelation 2:11 — *He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*

Verse 8 gives us the other side of that coin: he that overcometh **not** shall be hurt of the second death. And sadly from the descriptions in verse 8 we can see that this group includes both the persecuting Romans as well as the persecuted Christians who proved faithless in the end and failed to overcome. I think that fact is clearer from the ESV than it is from the KJV. Where the KJV has “fearful and unbelieving” in verse 8, the ESV has “cowardly and faithless.” This list begins, not with the Romans, but with the Christians who proved to be cowardly and faithless. They suffer the same fate as the murderers, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and the liars, which describe the Romans who worshipped Caesar and lied about and murdered the saints. Yes, these Christians saved their physical lives, but they lost their spiritual lives.

Mark 8:35 — *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.*

Let's pause for a moment here to ask a difficult question. What can we say about those Christians who renounced Christ under severe torture and threat of death, their own and perhaps also that of their family? Does it seem fair that they will suffer the same fate as those who inflicted that torture? As I said, it is a difficult question, but let's make a few observations about it.

First, anytime we are tempted to tell God that he is not being fair, we need to remember his response to that same accusation in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 18:25 — *Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal?*

We are the ones who are not fair, not God. “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34).

Second, God has promised his people that he will not lay on them a burden that is too heavy for them to bear.

1 Corinthians 10:13 — There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

Third, we need to remember that God is a loving, all-knowing judge. All throughout this book, we have been reminded that God loves his people and God knows what happens to his people. Yes, this is a difficult question, but we can trust the one who is in charge of answering that difficult question.

And fourth, however God deals with those who renounced Christ under torture, we need to be mindful of our responsibility in that regard. In the first century, those who stood up for Christ faced death and terrible hardship — what is our excuse if we, **facing none of that**, fail to stand up for Christ? Yes, some of those early Christians failed to overcome the **terrible boulder** that was placed in their path. But what can be said for us if we fail to overcome the **pebble** that is placed in our path?

Revelation 21:9

9 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

In verse 9, we once again see one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls of God's wrath that were poured out on Rome. Why do we see this angel here? This angel is a **connection** between what we are seeing here and what we saw before. This angel is a **reminder** of what we have seen before. In short, this angel appears so that we will know that what we are seeing here in Chapter 21 is occurring because of what we saw in the previous chapters. If we are tempted to think that perhaps the first part of the book was about the first century but the end of the book is about the end of the world, we need to think about this angel.

What is this angle about to show us? Is he about to show us heaven? No. The angel tells us what we are about to see — “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” We are about to see the victorious church!

That’s **what** we are seeing, but **when** are we seeing it? Are we about to see the church in heaven after the final judgment of the world, or are we about to see the church back on earth safe and sound after the judgment of Rome?

Didn’t verse 2 already answer that question? There John “saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” We will see that same statement again in verse 10. Not only are we not looking at heaven in these verses, but we are not looking at the church in heaven in these verses. We are seeing the church “coming down out of heaven” to a world made new after God’s judgment of Rome.

And, again, that’s not me saying that — that’s verse 2 and verse 10 saying that. And the angel that we see here in verse 9 stresses the connection between the judgement of Rome in the earlier chapters and the description of the church in this chapter.

Revelation 21:10-14

10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; 12 And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 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 in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

As we just said, verse 10 repeats the description we saw in verse 2. John is not seeing heaven, but rather John is seeing something coming down from heaven. That something can only be the church. What else is the holy Jerusalem from God? What else is the bride of the Lamb? What else is the holy city? What else would we expect to see in Chapter 21 having studied the previous twenty chapters?

Where in the Bible is the most beautiful description of the Lord's church? Is it in **Daniel 2**, where we read about the eternal kingdom that sweeps away the kingdoms of the earth? Is it in **Isaiah 2**, where we read about the house of God established on the mountains to which all nations are drawn? Is it in **Joel 2**, where the establishment of the church is described as the great and awesome day of the Lord? Is it in **Ezekiel 40**, where the church is described as a huge temple constructed according to the pattern of God? Is it in **Matthew 13**, where Jesus gave us the parables of the kingdom? Is it in **Matthew 16**, where Jesus promised to build his church? Is it in **Acts 2**, where we read a firsthand account of the church's establishment? Is it in **Ephesians 2**, where Paul tells us about the peace in the church between Jew and Gentile? Is it in **Ephesians 5**, where Paul beautifully describes Jesus' love for his church as a husband's love for his bride? Is it in **Hebrews 12**, where the church is described as the city of the living God?

Each of these is beautiful, but none of these would be my choice for the most beautiful description of the church. Instead, I would turn immediately to the concluding two chapters of Revelation that we are now studying. In my opinion, the description we are studying here is the most beautiful description of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Scriptures.

This beautiful description that begins in verse 11 is **not** a beautiful description of heaven but rather is a beautiful description of the church. Could some of these descriptions apply to heaven or to the church in heaven? Certainly, **some** of them could, but I think we will see that not all of the could. As we said earlier, heaven is beautiful for the same reason the church is beautiful — because God dwells there. And the church will be just as beautiful in heaven as it is on earth. But what the **text** tells us is that we are seeing the church on earth, and

what the **time frame** tells us is that we are seeing the church on earth shortly after this book was written.

As we mentioned last week, the Old Testament ends with a curse in Malachi 4:6. The New Testament by contrast ends with a beautiful description of the Lord's church, the holy city of God in which God is at last able to once again dwell with men as he did in the Garden before the Fall. The final chapters of Revelation are the perfect ending to the story of reconciliation that began with the opening chapters of Genesis.

So what does this beautiful description tell us about the church? Verse 11 tells us that the church has the glory of God. Verse 11 tells us that the church has a light like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Verse 12 tells us that the church has a great high wall with **twelve** gates and **twelve** angels, with the names of the **twelve** tribes of Israel on the twelve gates, and verse 13 tells us that there are three gates on each side. Verse 14 tells us that the wall has **twelve** foundations with the names of the **twelve** apostles of the Lamb.

Twelve gates. Twelve angels. Twelve tribes. Twelve foundations. Twelve apostles. Do you think the text is trying to tell us something here? I do! And we all know what it is! Twelve is the symbolic number for the people of God! How anyone could possibly read this description and not see the symbolic use of numbers in this book is completely beyond me! What we are seeing here is a description of the people of God, which is the church.