

REVELATION 21:21-27

²¹The 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.

²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The 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. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing 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.

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

What is heaven like? It's a rare thing for a preacher to pose that question to a group of people. Usually it's the other way around. People are fascinated by the question, "What is heaven like?" So much so that if I ever forgot to prepare a Bible lesson for my catechism students, I could just start talking about what heaven is like and they will ask question after question until the hour is over. Kids and adults ask if there will be dogs in heaven. What age will I be in heaven? Do I get to keep my piercings or tattoos in heaven? As if pastors have some sort of inside scoop about what heaven is like. And I continually disappoint catechism students when I tell them, "I don't know." Pastors don't get to have a special sneak peak of heaven, except for one—John.

About 60 years after Jesus rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, John was marooned on an Island in the Aegean Sea, when an angel appeared to him and gave him a revelation. What the angel showed John is recorded in the last book of the Bible called Revelation, and the end of the book is a description of heaven. Because our sermon text is from that description of heaven, on this day

the preacher can reliably talk about the question. “What is heaven like?” But then we have to add one more consideration, “Why does God tell us?”

The reason people want to know what heaven is like seems obvious to me, because life on Earth stinks. On Earth, there are final exams, and root canals, and homesickness, and goodbyes, and day after day battling temptation. You live long enough here, and you think, “There’s got to be something better than this. What’s it like?”

REVELATION’S DESCRIPTION OF HEAVEN

That’s what the book of Revelation is all about. Most of it is a description of how bad life is on earth. If you look in the middle part there is blood and bad guys and death. But at key points along the way, there’s this one recurring character, The Lamb, like a baby sheep. And the Lamb looks like he is no stranger to blood and bad guys and death. He looks as though he’s had his throat cut, and yet he is alive. More than alive, he is stronger than all the evil forces in the world. You get the picture. The Lamb is Jesus, who did die and yet... CHRIST IS RISEN [HE IS RISEN INDEED.] HALLELUIAH. And in the end Jesus will overcome all the bad guys that threaten you and I. That’s heaven.

So the end of Revelation is a description of that heaven. That’s what we are about to read. But here’s the thing: Revelation uses a lot of picture language. It’s hard to tell because Revelation uses lots of figurative language, it’s hard to tell if this description is exactly what heaven looks like, or if it’s just the basic idea. That’s because Jesus knows that right now you don’t need a perfectly accurate map of heaven. He wants you to know the emotions you’ll have heaven.

This section tells you what heaven is like in three emotions: “WOW!” “AH...” and “THANK GOD!”

WOW!

It starts by describing the entrance to the city of heaven. 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.** The city gate is made of a single pearl. A pea sized pearl is worth about \$500. Heaven’s are over 2000 times that size. Do you know how much that would be worth? WOW dollars and WOW cents! And the street is paved with gold. WOW!

Not only is it rich, it's fascinating. ²² **I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.** There's no temple there. No churches. Which is a good thing, because sometimes when I'm leading worship I see people do this emotion, [YAWN]. Do you know why that happens? Two reasons, one is because of boring preachers like me. If a preacher ever puts you to sleep, it's not because God is boring. It's because the preacher is failing to show you how awesome God is. The other reason is you. We all have a sinful nature in us that doesn't want to hear God's word. But in heaven, both preachers and sinful natures are history. No one can fail to show you God's awesomeness because you will see him directly, and you with no sinful nature will love it. No yawns in heaven, only WOW!

The whole place will be glowing with WOW-factor. 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.** There are museums all around the world filled with the treasures of the nations. There are hundreds of documentaries on Netflix telling stories of the most interesting and influential people in the world. In heaven all those things and all those people will be lined up to give their splendor and their glory to God. If you want to travel to see the world, in heaven your traveling days will be over because, ²⁶ **The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.** WOW!

AHH....

But there's another emotion in this picture of heaven too. AH... If you've ever felt threatened by bad people, if you've ever been hurt by injustice, if you are stressed out right now, then listen to this. ²⁵ **On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.** Can you imagine living in a place where nothing can hurt you? Sickness will never ruin your fun. You'll never be sad from missing someone. You'll never lock your door in heaven. AH...

THANK GOD!

And with all that excitement in heaven, with all that perfect peace, it's a shame that you have disqualified yourself from entering. I've done it to myself too. ²⁷ **Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful.** If you've ever told a half truth, if you've ever been ashamed of what you've done when you weren't thinking straight, if you've ever

been anything short of perfectly pure, you can't go in. That's what God says. Except... **Except for those whose names are written in the book of life.** Oh, I've disqualified myself from heaven a hundred times, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world took away my sin. He took away yours too. And with his blood he etched your name in his book. So you're in. No matter what you've done, no matter how shameful or deceitful it is, all the WOW and all the AH, it's all yours. THANK GOD!

That's what the Bible tells us about heaven. Nothing about dogs or tattoos, but forever you'll say WOW, and AH... and THANK GOD!

WHY DOES GOD TELL US ABOUT HEAVEN?

So if that is what heaven is like, why did God tell you that? Because he wants you to have something good to think about. He's inviting you to think about it. Have you ever noticed that most descriptions of heaven contain the word "like"? Heaven is like a wedding, like a party, like a kingdom. God isn't giving you an exact image so that you can say, "Well, that's what it is. End of conversation." He's inviting you to use your imagination. Imagine a street made out of gold but the gold is transparent. You've never seen that, so image it. Think about this nice thing. And it will be a thousand times better than you imagined.

Because God knows you already use your imagination for bad things. That's what worry is. You're imagining futures where things go wrong. That's what fear is. You're imagining how bad it will hurt, how hard it will be. And honestly, you're probably right. When Jesus was on earth, things went badly for him. Smart people laughed at him. His friends betrayed him. When he did what God wanted, he got hurt. And so when we meet the Lamb of God in the Revelation, he looks as though he had been slain, because on Earth, he was.

IMAGINE HEAVEN

You may be worried about final exams, root canals, saying goodbye, friends betraying you, people laughing at you, or even hurting you. And you're right to think about those bad things. When Saint Paul was preaching in the reading from Acts he said, "**We must through many hardships enter the kingdom of heaven.**" (Acts 14:22) You're right to think about a thousand horrors on earth. God knows you have to. So he also wants you to have something good to think about.

Saint Paul also said, **“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18)** God wants you to imagine the glory of heaven so you can compare it to the bad things of earth. Whenever you experience final exams on earth, think about a street made of transparent gold, and take a moment f “WOW!” On Earth, people will threaten you. That’s life on this side of heaven. So imagine the other side where nobody closes their doors at night. “AH...” I know you replay your past failures in your head, and feel guilty. Push back on that darkness with a, “THANK GOD! My name is written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

There’s an old American preacher from New Jersey during the American Revolution named Jonathan Edwards. He stacks of notebooks and filled them with writings sentences, paragraphs, phrases, all about heaven. He was imagining the gates of pearl, the streets of God, that fascinating country inhabited by most interesting people, where there is no sun or moon, just the incandescent friendship of Jesus.

Ah... Can you imagine it? You must! If you’re going to face the troubles of this world, if you are going to do some good in a world filled with bad, you must use your imagination and carefully consider our present sufferings aren’t even worth comparing to the glory.

That’s what makes joy victorious, that’s why joy marches victorious no matter what circumstances you’re facing. And that’s what heaven is like. Amen.