THE HOLY CITY

Revelation 19:11–22:5

Key Verse: 21:2

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

Hope. It’s so important to have hope. This world has many false hopes. Everything in this world perishes, spoils and fades away (1Pe1:4). But Revelation tells us about the most glorious hope for the people of God. It’s the Holy City. It’s the climax of the book of Revelation, what all the visions, all the struggles, all the battles are really about. In today’s study we want to learn more of Jesus, what he will do, and what hope he wants to give each one of us. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

Look at 19:11–16. Here we see a detailed description of Jesus. He’s the “rider on a horse” (11,19,21). In contrast to the deception of the beast and the prostitute, Jesus is called “Faithful and True” (cf. 3:14). This description of Jesus is similar to the one back in 1:12–16. Again, his eyes are like blazing fire. Again, there’s a sword coming out of his mouth. Again, he’s dressed in a robe, but this time, it’s “dipped in blood.” This time, he’s riding a white horse, and the armies of heaven are following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. This time, he’s coming with justice and waging war.

Revelation often mentions war. There’s a war in heaven between the archangel Michael and the dragon (12:7). Later, after being kicked out of heaven, the dragon goes off to wage war against God’s people on earth (12:17). The beast, endorsed by the dragon, is given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them (13:7). Revelation tells us that in the end the kings of the earth and the beast will wage war against the Lamb (17:14). This final battle is called “Armageddon” (16:16). But Satan is at war with God right now, and to do that, he attacks his people in this world. His weapons are persecution, compromise and the temptations of wealth and pleasure. But in the end, Jesus will come with the armies of heaven, with justice, and with the sword of the word of God, to wage war and win the final victory (cf. Ex15:3; Isa31:4; 42:13; 59:16–18; Hab3:11–13; Zech14:3). No one will be able to stop him.

Look at verse 12b. It says, “He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.” It may mean simply that no one has power over him. But the importance of a “name” is repeated often in Revelation. Revelation emphasizes the beast’s “name,” the blasphemous “names” on each of its heads, and the blasphemous “names” on the prostitute. Many people receive the “mark,” or “name,” of the beast (13:17; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Revelation tells us it’s vital whether or not a person’s “name” is written in the book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27). But it also repeatedly mentions a “new name.” Back in 2:17 Jesus promises to give a “new name” to those who are victorious in their spiritual struggle. In 3:12 he repeats that he will write on those who are victorious his “new name.” In 14:1 the 144,000 have the Lamb’s name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. Later, in 22:4, all who are in heaven will see God’s face and have his name on their foreheads. This “new name” is first mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah. When God saves his people, in a sense he marries them and gives them a new name (Isa62:2,4,12). This new name shows not only that they belong to God, but also, their final destiny. Jesus comes with this name not only for himself, but to give it to the people he redeems. Look at verse 13. It says that “his name is the Word of God.” Now look at verse 15a. The sharp sword coming out of his mouth is another reference to the word of God (Isa11:4; 49:2; 66:16; Hos6:5; Heb4:12; cf. 2Th2:8). Satan battles with deception and lies; but Jesus does battle with the truth, the word of God. The sword of the word of God is still our weapon to fight against the devil and his schemes (Eph6:17).

Revelation repeats three times about Jesus: “He will rule them with an iron scepter” (2:27; 12:5; 19:15). This quote is from Psalm 2. There, the kings of the earth rise up against the Lord and against his anointed (Ps2:1,2). But God’s King is his Son, and it says he will rule them with an iron scepter, or “break them with a rod of iron” (Ps2:9). It tells us that rebellion against God is futile. God’s Messiah will crush all the pride and rebellion against God in this world. The sinful world is basically in rebellion against God. It’s in the devil himself, and the devil also plants it in people. But when Jesus comes again, he will finally defeat and root out all forms of this rebellious spirit.

Verse 15b says: “He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.” It’s a vivid image taken from the ancient world. To make wine, people used to put large amounts of grapes into something called a winepress. It was a space dug into the ground where people would go in with bare feet to stomp on the grapes to get the juice out. Revelation takes this image and applies it to Jesus when he comes to bring God’s wrath. In this winepress, not wine, but blood flows out (14:20). The bottom of Jesus’ robe is stained with this blood (19:13a). Again, it fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah of what the Messiah would do (Isa63:2–6). As we’ve seen in Revelation, the fury of God’s wrath is based on his great love, as well as his great justice. We need to repent of our sins and believe that Jesus really is going to come again as the agent of God’s wrath against all the wicked. The final description of Jesus here is in verse 16. Again it’s repeated that he’s King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14). It means no one is higher than Jesus. He’s got the name that is above every name, and in the end, everyone, including even his worst enemies, will have to submit to him (Php2:9ff.).

In verses 17–21 John sees a vision of the final outcome of the battle. An angel calls all the birds to come and eat at “the great supper of God.” It’s a grotesque image of the carnage God will bring against all those who refused to repent and rebelled against him to the end. The beast and the kings of the earth and their armies waged war against the rider on the white horse and his army, but the beast and the false prophet were captured, and the two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest were killed with the sword, and the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. This vivid imagery is a powerful message that rebellion against God brings people to a horrible end.

In 20:1–3 John sees a vision of the dragon, who is the devil, or Satan, bound for a thousand years in the Abyss. There, he can’t deceive the nations anymore. Ancient people thought the Abyss was a large underground cave where disobedient spirits were sent (cf. Jude 6; Lk8:31). Many Jews thought there would be an intermediate kingdom before the end of the world. Here in his vision John sees it lasting a thousand years, also known as the millennium—symbolizing a very long time. The point is, God is able to stop the devil from deceiving people. Next, in verses 4–6, during this same thousand years Christ will reign on earth with his martyrs. Again, it says these people had died for their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God (20:4; cf. 1:2,9; 12:11). They refused to compromise their worship for their own benefit. The point is that these people who had suffered so much for their faith under the devil’s rule will finally reign with Christ. In verse 4, emphasizing this rule, John sees “thrones” (Mt19:28; Rev3:21; cf. Da7:9). Those who died for their faith came to life and reigned with Christ (20:4b). Verse 6 says they will be “priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.”

The point here is not to figure out details of a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, or to try to be in an elite group of people who get to be in the first resurrection, like getting into the first-class section on the flight to heaven. No, God gave John this vision to inspire believers who were suffering so much for their faith. Many people try to be comfortable Christians. But we Christians are all called to suffer, following in the beautiful footsteps of our Lord Jesus (1Pe2:21; 3:9). In the world it always seems that Christians lose. We’re taught to turn the other cheek, to sacrifice ourselves for Jesus and for others, to imitate Jesus’ humility, who made himself nothing. It looks foolish. But in the end, when we live out our faith in Jesus, we’re promised God’s justice, God’s reward, God’s total vindication. 2 Timothy 2:11,12a says, “Here is a trustworthy saying: ‘If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.’”

In verses 7–10 John sees the end of this vision. It’s a fulfillment of the prophecies of Ezekiel 38,39, where it says God will defeat his enemies and show his greatness and his holiness. Here, Satan is released from his prison to deceive all the nations, symbolized by the distant peoples of Gog and Magog, to gather together to fight against God. They’re huge in number, like the sand of the sea, and they surround God’s people to defeat them. Verse 9b says simply, “But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.” It’s based on the famous Bible story of how the prophet Elijah fought against the enemies of God’s people by calling down fire from heaven on them (2Ki1:10–14; cf. Lk9:54). Fire from heaven destroying God’s enemies also fulfills Ezekiel’s prophecy (Eze38:22; 39:6). But what does it mean to us? Right now, there’s nothing we can do against those who insist on being anti-God or anti-Jesus. They’re so strong, and they way outnumber us. We’re powerless. We shouldn’t try to fight them humanly. We should depend on God. Read verse 10. We’ll never see them again. All their evil influence will be totally gone. Here it seems God holds the devil, the beast and the false prophet most responsible for deceiving so many people.

In 20:11–15 John sees a vision of the final Judgment Day. The “great white throne” is the victorious throne and reign of God Almighty. And “him who is seated on it” is Jesus the Lamb who’s also the Lion (5:5). He’s the Judge of the living and the dead (Ac10:42; 2Ti4:1; 1Pe4:5). It says, “The earth and the heavens fled from his presence” (Rev20:11; cf. 6:14; 16:20; 2Pe3:10–12). He’s *that* holy, *that* powerful. The sea, and death and Hades had to give up all the dead, great and small. Every human being who ever lived will have to stand before the throne of Christ to give an account of the deeds done while in the body (2Co5:10). It’s God’s inevitable judgment: God will give to each person according to what they have done (Ro2:6; cf. Ps62:12; Pr24:12). It’s the ultimate expression of God’s justice, which is strongly emphasized in Revelation (15:3; 16:5,7; 19:2,11). It also says there are “books.” It’s another fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel (7:10). People typically try to hide and cover up what they do, whether it’s small or big things. But God is like the most thorough auditor who keeps records of absolutely everything. Hebrews 4:13 says, “Nothing in all creation his hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” On Judgment Day, we first stand in line to get our turn with the first book, the book of accounting. It records everything we ever did, good or bad. Some people’s record is so bad, some, pretty good. But then, the book of life is opened. It’s another fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy (Da12:1; cf. Ex32:32; Ps69:28; Lk10:20; Php4:3). Revelation repeatedly mentions the book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27). Whose name gets written in the Lamb’s book of life? Only those who repented of their sins and put their faith in Jesus. In the world there are humanly good people, and, humanly really bad people. But by his grace God records in the book of life anyone’s name who has received the grace of Jesus. It’s only his grace that justifies us before God. The real question is, not what have we done in our lives, but rather, is our name written there? Have we personally received the grace of Jesus for all our sins? Or are we trying to live by our own righteousness? Read verses 14,15. It tells us that there’ll be a final end to death itself (1Co15:26). It also tells us that the lake of fire is the second death. Jesus called it “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” and for all those who refused to repent (Mt25:41).

In 21:1–22:5 John describes the Holy City. Again, Revelation fulfills Ezekiel’s prophecies (Eze37,40–48). First of all, in 21:1 John quotes from the prophecy of Isaiah: “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa65:17). God our Creator will create a new heaven and new earth. In this new heaven and new earth, there’s a focal point. Read 21:2. What is this Holy City? It’s called “the new Jerusalem.” Jesus first promised it in Revelation 3:12. The old city of Jerusalem used to be the holy city. It was because it was the one place where God chose to dwell among his people. It was where he said his temple should be built. In the temple was the Most Holy Place, where God’s presence dwelled. But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Jerusalem and its temple became obsolete. Now, everything looks forward to the real Holy City, the new Jerusalem. It’s the place “where righteousness dwells” (2Pe3:13)—God’s righteousness.

What’s it like? It says it’s “like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” It means it’s breathtaking, and stunning, and more moving than we can imagine. But it’s not just about obtaining something physical or material. Read 21:3,4. It’s a place where God himself will dwell among his people. There, we’ll glorify God and enjoy him forever. He’ll be so close to us. He’ll personally comfort each one of us. He’ll personally wipe away each one’s tears. There’ll be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. We’ll be like people coming out of a long journey through a hot desert, finally finding an oasis, or like soldiers badly wounded and traumatized in battle, finally going to a place of peace, rest and healing. No more sorrow, no more fear, no more suffering.

Read 21:5. God wants us to really believe this promise of the Holy City. Read 21:6. It’s amazing: no matter who we are or what we’ve done, through Jesus, God wants to invite all spiritually thirsty people to come to this wonderful place and find the deepest satisfaction for our souls in the spring of the water of life (Isa55:1; Jn4:10). The things and people of this world may seem really good, but they always leave us thirsty. On the other hand, the Holy City will totally satisfy our souls with the best God wants give us.

Read 21:7. Everyone is invited, but the key is, only those who are victorious get to inherit all this. How can we be victorious? In ourselves, we can’t. We’ll surely be defeated by Satan. But Jesus has triumphed (5:5). He told us, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn16:33). 1 John 5:4,5 says, “…for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” But to be victorious, we can’t just have head knowledge. We have to do God’s will to the end (2:26). We have to be faithful, even to the point of death (2:10b). Ultimately, we can triumph only by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony of his grace (12:11).

Read 21:8. This tells us that in the Holy City there will be no sin, no evildoers. All those who persisted in their sin to the end, ignoring all God’s warnings and invitations, will receive God’s true and just punishment. Jesus our Lord warned us about this. He said, “But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him” (Lk12:5).

In 21:9–14 the angel showed John a vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. Again, it’s described as the bride—this time, it’s “the wife of the Lamb.” It means the city itself is not a building—it’s the community of all God’s people who had faith in Jesus. Read 21:11. Because of what God has done in his people’s lives through Christ, it will be the most beautiful, glorious place. The twelve gates and twelve foundations with the names of the tribes of Israel and of the apostles tells us it’s a place of all God’s people all throughout history. In 21:15–17 we see it’s a perfect cube. It’s the same in proportion as the Most Holy Place. It means the entire Holy City fulfills the Most Holy Place. The numbers 12, 144 and 12,000 symbolize the complete number of God’s people from all nations. Nobody will be missing. In 21:18–21 we see all kinds of precious stones, pearls and gold. It means the Holy City will be the most beautiful, valuable and eternal dwelling place for all God’s people to enjoy forever. Read 21:22,23. In the Holy City, we’ll enjoy the presence of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, and his glory will be our shining light. In 21:24–27 there will be no more night, and therefore nothing to fear, and nothing and no one impure, shameful or deceitful—nothing to disturb this amazing place.

Read 22:1,2. Here we see the river of the water of life, and the tree of life. They will supply God’s people with eternal life and satisfaction for our souls. It says that the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. So many have been wounded by sin and Satan. But in the Holy City God plans to heal all our wounds. The final picture of the Holy City is in 22:3–5. Let’s read it. So, what should we learn from all this? We have to live in this world where Satan still is trying to deceive us and tempt us and get us to go astray. In this world, there seems to be no justice and an overwhelming amount of rebellion. We need to see the vision of the Holy City. We need to let this vision fill our souls with its glory, brightness and beauty. We need to believe the good news that God wants to give us all this, and that he wants to comfort and heal us and dwell with us forever.