

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

People love to talk about what heaven will be like. You must have ideas. Maybe your ideas come from jokes you've heard about heaven—you know, St. Peter and the pearly gates. Maybe your ideas come from longings you've had in this life for freedom from one of sin's many tyrannies, or from longing to be reunited with a beloved believer whom the Lord has already called home. It's fairly rare for people to confine their ideas about heaven to just what the Bible says. In fact, there's a lot of misinformation out there about what the next life is going to be like. For example, lots of people think that we become angels when we get to heaven. Not true. We will be like the angels, but we will remain humans (Matthew 22:30).

Sometimes the misinformation is so unhelpful that people say, "I don't think I want to go to heaven," like when people say heaven will be like being in church all the time. Worshiping the Lord in church can be wonderful!—when the Holy Spirit matures your faith, and the message is presented in a way that touches your intellect, your emotions, your will. Worship here on earth can also be boring. Heaven will be the opposite of boring.

If we want to know **WHAT HEAVEN WILL BE LIKE**, doesn't it make sense to check out the Book in which God reveals things only he can know? The Bible is trustworthy because, as we heard in the Gospel for today (John 14:26), the Holy Spirit taught the writers what they were to write down for us. So with the Holy

Spirit's aid, let's look more closely at Revelation 21.

There the apostle John writes: <sup>10</sup>*He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high. Who is this "he"? One of God's angels. He carried me away in the Spirit...* or "in spirit," in a state of heightened awareness to things spiritual. What did the angel show John? <sup>10</sup>*He showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. <sup>11</sup>It shone with the glory of God.* There's our first answer on what heaven will be like. God's glory will be there. And it won't disappear after a brief glimpse, like it did for the three disciples the day that Jesus was transfigured before them on the mountain top. God's glory will be there, and we'll get to see it, live in it.

But what is God's glory like? How do you explain the glory of God to those who have never seen it, especially if you haven't seen it yourself? Well, you patch together a description from all that God has revealed about himself in the Bible. Start with the fact that God is holy. Yes, he's loving too, but we wouldn't care about that if we knew nothing about God's holiness, his utter sinlessness. God is so holy that a brilliance emanates from him, which the Bible refers to as 'his glory.' It can best be described as colorful light. John saw God's glory in his vision and writes: *its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.* Sounds beautiful, doesn't it?

Remember the first time God revealed his glory to a large group of people? The Bible reports that shortly after the Lord rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the Lord met with them at Mt.

Sinai, obscuring his glory in a cloud the color of dark furnace smoke, out of which shot bright lightning bolts. After the Israelites had built the special tent called the Tabernacle, the glory of the Lord descended from the mountain onto the tent, and the Lord met with Moses inside. The twelve tribes of Israel were arranged around the Tabernacle, three tribes per side. And God's glory was there. The large painting in our fellowship hall depicts the glory of God over God's people in the desert.

Now connect this with what John tells us about heaven. The Holy City <sup>12</sup>*had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.* <sup>13</sup>*There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.* What John saw reminds me of the way the children of Israel organized their camp with the Tabernacle in the middle.

But the picture is a little different this time. Instead of that special tent, John's been describing a city. He writes, <sup>14</sup>*The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.* With twelve foundations no earthquake is going to destroy this city, like earthquakes have destroyed many middle eastern cities.

John writes: <sup>22</sup>*I did not see a temple in the city.* No temple?! How will we do church in heaven? There's always been a place. In Old Testament times, God gave his people one special place to meet with him.

If you wanted to go to church, you traveled to Jerusalem (or Shiloh before King David's time). But after Jesus ascended to God's right hand, the Holy Spirit spread the message about Jesus, and now there are believers all over the world. They all come together for worship, usually in church buildings, but lots of times in houses, or in caves, or under a tree, somewhere made special by what happens there—God comes to serve them through Word and Sacraments. That's what worship really is, not so much us praising God, but more importantly God gladly hearing our heartfelt confession and joyfully pronouncing us clean through whomever is leading worship.

But in heaven God will not need a place to meet with his people. He won't work through His Word and Sacraments. He'll meet with us directly. John <sup>22</sup>*did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.* God's visible presence everywhere will make the whole city a place of worship. So in a sense heaven will be like worshipping the Lord all the time. But don't tell anyone who thinks church is boring. Interacting with gracious God will be forever awesome.

You know, it's too bad our electrical grid here in the US is so reliable. We are almost never limited by darkness..., which makes it difficult to appreciate what we hear next from John. <sup>23</sup>*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.* Maybe we can identify with these words better if we consider how

dark our world has gotten spiritually. Everyone wants their sin to be treated as okay: greed, worry, hatred, disrespect, selfishness, godlessness, unbeneficial language, the many forms of sexuality beyond male/female marriage. Darkness is growing. We help make it darker with our sins. What good news to hear that in heaven Jesus will be our lamp! The darkness will be gone. Our Savior will give us light after removing all our darkness. What will heaven be like? Jesus the Light will be with us.

But now I'm wondering if any of you have figured out that I misdirected you a bit in this sermon. I've been talking about what heaven will be like. But listen again to John's first sentence. <sup>10</sup>*He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven [the sky] from God.* The Holy City isn't heaven itself. In the previous verse, the angel calls the city "*the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*" Jesus isn't going marry heaven. On the Last Day he will marry the Church and take his bride to the heavenly home he has been preparing for us. John has not been describing heaven. He's been describing the Church in heaven. That's why there are all those references to the number 12, the number most often associated with the people of God. 12 foundations with the names of the 12 apostles, 12 gates made of 12 pearls with the names of the 12 tribes, 12 angels guarding the gates, all three measurements of the city as 12,000 stadia, and the walls 144 (=12x12) cubits thick. Clearly the Lord is having John describe the Church in

heaven. So instead of asking what heaven will be like, we ought to be asking, "What will we be like in heaven?"

John describes the Church in heaven as having <sup>12</sup>*a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates.* If the Church in heaven has a high wall, it is safe from attack. If the gates are guarded by angels, we will be safe. For Christians throughout much of history, 'safety' meant that the persecutions would finally stop. But no one has tried to kill you lately for being a Christian. Still, ridicule and exclusion and disapproval cause plenty of pain. Good news! The high wall and the guarded gates in John's vision mean we will be safe from all put-downs in the next life. No one will ever express their disappointment at you again, not even with that tone of voice or that "tse-hhuhh!" Why not? Because you won't ever do anything wrong when you leave this life. People in heaven never disapprove of others around them. Whew!

John reports: <sup>12</sup>*On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.* The names on the gates imply that only those who belong to those tribes can enter by those gates. Don't worry if you're not an Israelite by birth. Many passages of Scripture teach that all believers in Jesus, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world—all such believers belong to God's people. We believers are the new Israel, spiritual Israel, the people with the same faith as Abraham. We get to go in through the 12 gates. The fact that there are three gates on all four sides of the city is the Lord's way of telling us that he has

welcomed believers into the Church from all over the world.

When John writes: <sup>14</sup>*The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*, it's not that the actual apostles got turned into foundations. That would hurt! No, the apostles' names are on the foundation because they taught God's Word. That's the foundation of our faith. That's what makes us members of the Church. All who believe what the apostles taught will be there.

John also describes the church in heaven as 1400 miles wide, and 1400 miles long. That's like from here south to Laredo, TX and like from here west to Boise, ID. The size of the city shows how many people belong to the Lord's church. Most congregations on earth are small. The Church in heaven will never feel small or lonely.

But John pictures the church as 1400 miles high too. That's over 1300 miles beyond the atmosphere out into space. So we're dealing with picture language. The cube shape is a way to show that everyone who belongs to the church through faith in Jesus will be with us there.

How will we get to be a part of that city? Not through anything we have done. John says (v. 8) there won't be any liars there. If we fibber McGees are going get into heaven, we need someone to wash us clean of all our lies. We know Jesus did that because we are pictured as having white robes washed in Jesus' blood. God sees us

as having always told the truth.

That's why John sees the church in heaven as so very beautiful. But poor John. Human language doesn't have adequate words to describe the Church's beauty. This is the best he could do: <sup>18</sup>*The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass*. Jasper is a beautiful red stone, opaque, and striped or speckled, with non-symmetric and non-repeating patterns. Imagine a wall of Jasper 200 feet thick all around this 1400 mile long city. Beautiful. Because of Jesus, we're beautiful. The city is made of gold so pure that you can see light through it, like glass. Have you ever seen anything this awesome before? Well then you get the point. The Church in heaven will have a purity that transcends our present experiences. This present life will be replaced by an existence of incomparable excellence and beauty. Doesn't it make you want to go there now?

But we're not there yet. And Satan is going to try every trick to keep us from staying connected to Jesus. Satan could tempt your pastor or your parents or other spiritual leaders to disappoint you. If he can get you to stop hearing God's Word, or get you more excited about sports or a hobby or a pastime, or get us to think that a good education is more important than getting educated in the Bible, then we are in danger. Let's keep making time for God's Word and the Sacrament. This is how the Holy Spirit will keep us connected to our Savior Jesus till God takes us to see his glory.