May 6, 2020 | A Study on Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation

The River of Life

Last week in chapter 21 we read about John’s vision of the New Jerusalem. John saw a huge city adorned with precious stones but unlike Jerusalem of old, there was no temple because God and Jesus will be the temple. Now the angel shows John a river that flows from the throne of God. You may recall from last week’s study that in eternity the sea will no longer exist. The fact that a river exists without a sea reminds me of a conversation my brother had with a co-worker who asked during a particularly long drought what would happen if it never rained again. My brother’s answer was that the oceans would rise which confused the fellow. The fact is that the oceans provide almost all of the water that forms clouds which in turn provide the rain to supply rivers. Since God created the hydrologic cycle, He certainly has the power to change it. In eternity the supernatural source of water to supply the river flowing through the New Jerusalem will be God. John’s vision of the river is similar to the vision Ezekiel had which is described in Ez. Chapter 47. In that vision Ezekiel saw a man with a measuring rod giving precise dimensions of the temple, outer courts and the city of Jerusalem as well as a river that flowed from the temple. Ezekiel’s vision is thought by many to be a vision of the Millennium Jerusalem. The man takes Ezekiel along the bank of the river and leads him into the water at various locations showing him that the water is increasing in depth. At first it is only ankle deep, then knee deep, then up to his waist and finally deep enough to swim in. Charles Spurgeon saw this as symbolic of a Christian maturing in faith. “The first sign of faith is when a man learns to lie back upon Christ–to give himself up entirely to Him–when he ceases to be active and becomes passive, brings no good works, no efforts, no merits, to Jesus by way of recommendation, but casts his soul upon the eternal merit and the finished work of the great Substitute. That is faith in its passive form, floating faith. In the heavenly river you must float before you can swim. But the text does not speak of waters to float in, though this is essential. Many people never get beyond that floating period, and they conclude that they are safe and all is well because they fancy their heads are above water; whereas the man who is really taught of God goes on from the floating to the swimming. Now, swimming is an active exercise. The man progresses as he strikes out. He makes headway. He dives and rises: he turns to the right, he swims to the left, he pursues his course, he goes withersoever he wills, Now, the holy Word of God and the Gospel are “waters to swim in.” Let us learn to trust God in active exertions for the promotion of His kingdom, to trust Him in endeavors to do good.” I would add to Spurgeon’s commentary that the we are called to swim in waters so deep that we drown, that is we die to ourselves. Paul wrote of this often (Rom. 6:11, 8:13, Gal. 2:20, 5:24).

This river Ezekiel saw also symbolizes the growth of the church. Just as the river gained in volume, the church has grown from a small group on the day of Pentecost to a size that will ultimately require a city with the dimensions of the New Jerusalem to accommodate its members. On each side of the river in John’s vision he sees the tree of life which bears a crop of fruit each month. It is not clear whether there are only 2 trees or many. The original tree of life was in the middle of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9) and its fruit was available to Adam and Eve, however they chose instead to eat the fruit from the other tree in the middle of the garden which was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Ezekiel also saw trees on both sides of the river that provided fruit for food and leaves for medicine. Similarly, John says that the leaves of the tree of life provide leaves for medicine. The tree is symbolic of Jesus who will provide ongoing sustenance in eternity.

Verse 3 tells us that the throne of God and Jesus will be in the midst of the New Jerusalem and verse 4 tells us that we will see God’s face. The prospect of seeing God’s face struck terror in the hearts of the Old Testament prophets since they thought it would bring instant death (Isa. 6:5). For the Christian this will be a normal occurrence and fulfill prophecies of Paul and John (1st Cor. 13:12, 1st John 3:2-3). In verses 6 & 7, the second coming of Jesus is imminent but according to God’s definition of imminent (2nd Peter 3:8). In verses 8 & 9, John repeats his error of worshiping an angel (see 19:10).

Unlike Daniel who was told to seal his vision (Dan. 12:4), John is told not to seal the prophecy and so it is available to us to read some 2000 years later, puzzling as it is. In verse 11 the angel says let people continue as they are whether right or wrong similar to what the angel told Daniel (Dan. 12:10). I think the message is that when people have the Gospel presented to them they have free will to choose. Verses 14 and 15 make clear the consequences of their choice. Verse 17 has a dual invitation. First the bride (the church) implores Jesus to come then there is one last invitation for the lost to accept the free gift of salvation. The chapter closes with an admonition to maintain the integrity of prophecy; add nothing and subtract nothing.

We have completed the journey we started months ago to explore this complex book. As we have discussed, many of the events in Revelation were prophesied by Old Testament prophets who also recorded prophecy about future events that are now history (captivity and return from exile of Israel, destruction of the temple, rise and fall of the Roman Empire, etc). There was also prophecy about the Millennium. When reading what these prophets wrote it is sometimes hard to determine where their prophecies fit in. The books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah are the best sources for Old Testament prophecy that helps in a better understanding of Revelation. While there are many different interpretations of Revelation, they all have one thing in common; life in eternity with God and Jesus and that is what truly matters.

I will discuss with Steve where to go next as we continue our study of God’s Word. I look forward to the day (hopefully soon) when we can meet in person. I get much more from our study when all of you share your thoughts.