

# No Church in Heaven

Revelation 21:10, 22:-22:5

The new Jerusalem is an image of heaven in the book of Revelation. There is a curious feature of this image of heaven—there is no temple in the city. Rather, God is the temple. In ancient Israel, the temple was a symbol of centuries of the religious control of God. The leadership in the temple controlled people's access to God by controlling the means of seeking God's forgiveness. So, if keeping God happy was the secret to survival, then you had to go through the temple and its way of doing business.

Jesus, according to the Gospels, challenged that very temple not just by criticizing its leaders, but by challenging their very authority to represent God. He even asserted that God had turned his back on the temple and it would be destroyed. That challenge seems to have been instrumental in his being arrested and crucified. But paradise reflects an immediacy of God's presence. It is never having to invoke that presence, but awoken to it. Paradise is living aware that we live in the very life of God.

Paradise is powered by the Spirit. "There will be no need of sun or moon for illumination for the glory of God is its light." (Rev. 21:23) Paradise is existence with God for our light, our enlightenment, and also our energy. I've worked many years work as a pastor and even more years before that going to church. I have done lots of volunteering and put in lots of effort trying to get others to volunteer and get involved. I've found the biggest fear and resistance I've seen with people is their concern with committing and then getting in over their heads with work and responsibility. There is a fear of endless demands on their time and energy with no way out—that they would get stuck.

Something similar can happen with people's commitment of money. What if I make a pledge, a commitment to give a set amount to church, then find I can't fulfill it? It would be embarrassing, possibly humiliating, even if only the church treasurer knows. I know how it feels when you think you can do something, then get into it and realize you just can't. Let me encourage you not to let that fear stop you from doing what you feel God may be calling you to do and be. God is our energy and clarity. This is a message that can and need to risk doing what we feel is right, what is core for us, and trust the light and energy God gives us and continues to give us.

Paradise is safe and secure. "Nations will walk by God's light and its gates will never shut. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations." (Rev. 21:25-26) Paradise is a world that is secure with everyone having plenty and no one in want. The only way I can imagine a world that secure is for us to find a way to increase trust and decrease our need to dominate out of fear.

To accomplish such a dream is a long a precious process. We are far away from being able, as a nation, to just lay down our arms and say "live in peace." We are also far from a place where we, as individuals, can fully eschew violence even in self-defense. But unless this is our individual and collective goal and unless we are committed and actually working toward non-violent solutions to inter-personal and international conflicts, the paradise pictured in scripture will not happen in our world. It cannot happen in our lives until we give ourselves to make it happen.

But is paradise for everyone? “Nothing unclean will enter it nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood—only those written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (Rev. 21:27) What do you think of this limitation? Who gets left out of heaven? There is a pretty restrictive way of looking at this description. Everyone who is not living according to Jewish Law can’t get into heaven. Many Christian groups believe that non-Christians are left out—that it’s really just too bad. To those receiving this message at the end of the first century this message was seen as encouragement to remain faithful and to endure.

I believe paradise is a total union with God and with each other. To enjoy and participate in such union, there is no room for anything except love. This description of paradise can service to guide and motivate us to live inclusively. It inspired me to write this poem about heaven.

A place to go  
    after death  
    to be with  
    those we love  
A childhood image  
    a grown-up hope  
    relationships continue  
    easing pain of loss  
Always an uneasy  
    thought  
    what about those  
    who are not here  
    in heaven?  
What of them?  
  
It’s just too bad  
    I guess  
    but is heaven  
    ever a place of  
    too bad?  
  
Heaven  
    a lens  
    a window  
    a way of  
    looking at now  
    and here  
And knowing  
    up from down  
    and real from  
    illusion  
  
Seeing God  
    in the least  
    of these  
    a believing  
    it’s true  
And gauging

all my life  
by that belief  
It's not so important  
how we choose  
to feed the poor  
clothe the naked  
visit those  
in prison

What's important?  
to believe  
it's true  
God lives in them  
And they are  
Our way for  
Knowing God.

To believe  
there may be  
no other way  
for us to know

You are  
my way  
perhaps  
I am yours

Heaven  
seeing  
and being  
and believing  
in God  
there is no  
too bad

Heaven  
a miracle  
a life  
a now  
and always

A lesson  
to hold  
and to share  
(Jack F. Price, ©2010)

The image of paradise according to the author of Revelation is of life without any need for a temple. There would be no institution, ritual, or process--no church or synagogue connecting people and God. Paradise is an existence in which God shines in and through each person and through the communion of all people directly with God. "No church in heaven" is not a condemnation, but a recognition that the purpose of church is to help people prepare for living in touch with God. Church is never an end in itself. We work hard at Crossroads to be church, to develop a strong sense of community. There is lots of focus, lots of energy, to be and to build

Crossroads Church. We work hard at building community life, at decision-making, worship, caring for our facility, and at the spiritual growth of those who come here. Church is a place where we come together, to gather and remind ourselves and each other who God calls each of us to be and what God calls all of us to do. This is a good thing, but if building, growing, and maintaining this church, this congregation, is the primary reason for its existence, then it's a goal sadly misplaced.

The work of church is to help us learn about God, experience God's love, and as result to reshape the world in the image of God's *Shalom*--what we call justice, compassion, and inclusion. The writer of Revelation suggests that the church as we know it is a tool to help us remember who we are and how we need to be living. Church exists to remind us and help connect us to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, mainly through relationships. Church exists for us to encourage each other and hold each other accountable to be all we can be and to live as fully as we can. It's a gift. Let us use the gift of Crossroads Church to clarify and identity call and together to help reshape the world around us in partnership with God and in the image of God's love.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22: 1-2)

The number twelve reminds us of the tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of Jesus, the symbol of the church. What we do as church, our fruit, is for the healing of the nations. Let us rise to meet this invitation to full partnership with God, to grow in spiritual maturity, and open to the living presence of God's Spirit in us and through us. And let us produce fruit in our lives and our shared life as church that will heal the nations and heal our nation. Let this fruit bring healing through transforming the community around us outside the walls of our building and the community within these walls.

We celebrate Mother's Day today, honoring the role of mothers and mother figures in our lives. We recognize that the truest tribute we can give is to live our lives according to the best values we received from our mothers at their best. We have to live our tribute for it to be meaningful. So let us remember that our worship is never finished, never complete, until justice comes on earth, until in us the life of Jesus is finally given birth, and until each of us devotes ourselves to seeking maturity along a faithful way—until we find the culmination of our worship is living love each day. "God, help us worship you truly and faithfully with our living. Amen"

## **Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5**

<sup>10</sup>And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. <sup>22</sup>I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup>And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. <sup>25</sup>Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. <sup>26</sup>People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. <sup>27</sup>But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

22Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup>Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup>they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

## **Paradise**

**Paradise: Powered by Spirit**

**Paradise: Safe and Secure**

**No Church in Heaven?**

**Call to Action**