

STRANGER TIMES, Week #6: "THE COMING CHRIST" (Jill Weber)

- Where have you seen God at work in your life this week? (Share any brief examples and encouragements).
- Was there anything from Sunday's message which you found particularly inspiring or challenging?
- Was there anything else you particularly noticed?

Revelation 21:1-5 (Please read the whole chapter)

¹Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' ⁵He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'

The story the Bible tells is written on the grandest scale. It begins in Genesis with the creation of 'the heavens and the earth'. It concludes with the Book of Revelation, with its vivid vision of the end... but now we find that this is not the end, it is a new beginning, a new creation, 'a new heaven and a new earth' in which the sea – the primordial 'waters of chaos' – is no more. What is perhaps surprising is that this new creation is not a garden paradise, but a city – the new Jerusalem. The first city in the Bible was built by Cain – the man who killed his brother and fled from the presence of God (Genesis 4:16-17). The city has always been a place which promises great opportunity and wealth, but which soon reveals a ruthless heart of violence, loneliness, and disappointment. A city is not just a collection of buildings; it has always been a spiritual power. The Book of Revelation makes this abundantly clear in its portrayal of 'Babylon the Great' (the paradigm of a 'Great City'), which is personified as 'the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth' (Revelation 17:5). But Chapter 21 offers a transformed vision, not of a prostitute, but of a faithful bride – 'the wife of the Lamb'. "What man has been seeking since the dawn of civilization", writes French sociologist, Jacques Ellul, "he finally finds when God offers him the new city... What man wanted from his city he at last has – in the unique vision, both promise and reality, at the end of time."¹ In the 4th Century BC, the Greek writer Herodotus (known as 'the Father of History'), wrote of Babylon that, "the length of its sides (it forms a square) is 120 Stadia."² This was unimaginably huge – a city 14 miles square. But the new Jerusalem utterly eclipses Babylon. The vision is of a city measuring 12,000 Stadia (1,400 miles) by 12,000 Stadia – and it is not a square, for it is also 12,000 Stadia high! The city has no Temple, because it is all a sanctuary filled with the presence of God, built (like the 'Holy of Holies') as a cube as vast as the Roman Empire! As Ezekiel had prophesied, "The Lord is There."

- *Heaven in the popular imagination (as seen in cartoons and any number of Hollywood movies) tends to involve people, conveniently equipped with angel wings, sitting around on clouds playing harps. Where did we get that idea from? How do you imagine your 'ultimate destination'?*
- *Why do you think this vision of 'the end' – the new creation – is about a city and not a 'return to the garden'?*
- *Why is it significant that this is a vision, not of people 'going to heaven', but of the 'Holy City' coming down out of heaven to earth?*
- *Revelation is a book full of symbols. How literally should we imagine the picture painted by John in this chapter? If this is really another symbol, what might the reality look like? Do we have any idea?*
- *What exactly is this city? It comes out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, but is this the church – the bride of Christ?*
- *What's with all the jewels, the gates, the doors, the foundations, and the transparent gold streets? What does this suggest to you?*
- *What do you think it means to know that its gates will never be shut (v.25)?*

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Eerdmans, 1970) p.194

² Herodotus, *Histories* Book 1, Section 178