

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Seeing God's Face

Revelation 22

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The song we have just sung draws its inspiration, of course, from the beautiful scene at the end of Revelation, and today in that scene, we hear and see in our spiritual imagination a picture of the end. The end in time and the purpose and promise of all things.

"All things are God's," says Colossians.

"All things are good," says the Creation story.

"All things shall be redeemed," says Romans.

"All shall be well," Julian of Norwich assured during a period of famine, pandemic, and war. All shall be well, but it sure doesn't feel like it many days.

The story of humanity in Scripture begins in a lovely garden but quickly becomes entangled in sin and shame and people hiding from God. We know that human story very well. It's written on the opening pages of scripture and in the stories of families, communities, and nations. We know the story. The question is, *how will this go? And how will this end?*

We easily recognize ourselves in the stories and characters that populate the Bible's narrative. It's an old text mostly about an ancient nation, but it's also universally relevant. We see ourselves in those people. Adam and Eve's self-assured, self-reliance and shame. Abraham's epic faith coupled with a lack of faith, too. Jacob's wrestling with God for answers to the mystery of his identity and life. Moses' courage and Moses' cold feet. The early Christians who could be sacrificially faithful and then turn around and be unbelievably petty. And on and on. These are stories about humans, and they are very human stories. You can find yourself somewhere. They're stories of humans at our best and at our worst and most of the time somewhere caught in between.

The individual stories are painted on a huge canvas. God works in individual lives and situations and in nations and epochs. The composition is titled: *How will this go? How will this end?*

Revelation is a book, an apocalyptic vision about *how does this go* and *how does this end*. It is written to people who are so deep in the middle of everything, they are losing their ability to see clearly. Small Christian communities existed like flickering lights in the seemingly impenetrable darkness of the inevitability of the Roman imperial empire, and they are losing their sight. Losing their ability to see what God sees.

We already see them dealing with this in Jesus' life. Jesus, living in occupied Israel near the height of the power and reach of Rome, once held up a coin and said, "Who's picture is on this coin?" and they answered, "Looks like Caesar." Yes, Caesar's name and image are on the coin. Then Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what it's Caesar's and give to God what is God's." But what if everything is imprinted with Caesar's name on it? Caesar was the emperor of Rome, the

political and spiritual heartbeat of Empire. What if you're told everything is God's but you can't see anything anymore that isn't claimed by Caesar? How do you give to God what is God's if everything is Caesar's? This is the kind of existential tension Christians find themselves in when they live in a world that by all accounts is completely given to the way of Rome. *How will this go?* It's not going well. *How will this end?* Might as well give up the way of Jesus, and go along with the materialistic, violent, self-interested way of the world.

Revelation says, "No! Can't you see? Can't you see how this ends?" Jesus, for his part, holds up a coin. In Revelation, John holds up the images of two cities. This is a tale of two cities. In chapter 18, the Roman empire is represented by a city that is foul, immoral, and over which a funeral song is already being sung. It is doomed. In chapters 21-22, the community of God is represented by a vibrant, secure, abundant city. John of Patmos, in writing Revelation, presents this as a choice. You have a choice: you can choose to give yourself to Rome and suffer its fate; or you can struggle now, perhaps even suffer now, to live in the city of God. What it means is that your struggle and suffering now to live faithful to the way of Jesus and turn your eyes to God has a purpose and an end. It is not a waste or foolishness. You live in Rome now, and it seems there's no way out; maybe you're even making your own Romish neighborhood out of your life these days. But this is not all there is, and Revelation presents it as a choice.

You see this choice? This is what Revelation is set up to pose to us. You can choose the way of Rome, and John goes over and above to paint the picture of the fate of Rome--not just the historical Rome, but all that Rome represents—the easy way. The way of going along to get along; of seeking your advantage even to the suffering of others; the way of violence and slavery; the commodification of everything and everyone; the way of earthly power. We are always in every era challenged with this option: the way of Rome.

In the midst of all of this, Revelation fills our eyes with sight of another way, another city. A heavenly city coming down as a gift from God, not from Caesar but from God. There's a reason you can't see it just yet everywhere you look; Caesar is powerful, but he's not ultimate. Rome will fall; Rome will fail. The new city is a new Jerusalem, the city of God.

This is hope, Revelation style. If the way of the world around us and within us is doomed, the way of God and God's people is a gleaming city beyond our wildest imaginations. If you ever feel hopeless, despairing about your faith, about the world, about yourself, this vision is directly for you and for people like you. The new city comes from God; it is a gift. It always has been.

The story begins in a garden. It ends in a city. And oh, this city. The city measures 12,000 stadia on each side. The number 12,000 is a way of speaking of community. 12 is the fullness of the people of God, and 10 is the number of perfection. When you see a number like 12,000, you're imagining a city that contains the fullness of the holy people of God. And it's huge, almost beyond our comprehension; 12000 stadia is something like 1500 miles on each side, so this is a city the size of Texas. Rome was a large city, but the new city of God dwarfs it.

This is an unusual ending for apocalyptic writings. Usually, apocalyptic writings end with a small group, a remnant being rescued from the punishing fate that awaits everyone else. Those in the remnant are made to feel special because they are among the few who will survive the apocalypse. That's not how the Bible ends. The Bible ends with this picture of a city that's big enough for everyone, and people come from everywhere. Everyone who wants to come, comes, and there is room for all. This is not a tribal story of a single people; this is a global vision of all people. It's big enough for everyone, and they all come. The kings of the earth come; the nations come. The gates of this city never close by day, and there's never night. That's how wide open this city is to all who will come. There is security in openness.

If it's a new Jerusalem then there must be a new temple, right? Jerusalem is known for its temple. There must be a temple, a dwelling for God? The temple was the heart of the old city until Rome destroyed it 30 years before Revelation was written. So, where's the new temple in the new city? There is not a temple. Instead, the whole city is the temple; indeed, the whole city is the holy of holies. God is immediately, fully present everywhere, every moment. Can you imagine the force of this on 1st-century folks who knew about how Rome destroyed the temple and may have watched it burn with their own eyes? Revelation's vision is something like, "Rome, you destroyed the temple. You haven't done anything to destroy God. God is not dead. God is here."

The description goes on and on, each corner you turn fills your eyes with more glory: like it's all gold or all crystal or all jewels; gates are made of pearl. The city encompasses a renewed Eden. The tree of life stands now for the healing of the nations, rather than the fall of humankind. A river flows from the throne of God, the river of life, the tree of life. It's all here, and all is redeemed.

Earlier our ears filled with music as we heard and joined in the song of all the creatures' *Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God Almighty*. Now our eyes are full of the spectacle of this scene beyond our wildest imagination. Yet this is still only the beginning.

In John's writing, particularly the Gospel, there's often a contrast between night and day, between darkness and light. Night and darkness represent not understanding or believing, and daytime and light represent understanding and believing. Those who do not believe are in the dark. Those who believe are in the light. But here at the end of Revelation, it's not the difference between darkness and light. Here at the end, it's the difference between the light and that which is *beyond* light, the source of light.

Those who let their eyes fill with the glory of the city—as glorious as it is—miss what comes next and what is beyond. We could go on and on describing and imagining the holy city and John does for almost two chapters, but then in one verse points us beyond what our eyes see. In verse four, "The redeemed shall see God's face." They shall see God's face. To see God's face is the enduring struggle of humanity. We hide from it; we are prevented from seeing it. Prophets cower in fear that they got a glimpse of God's face and so would be struck dead.

God's face is hidden from us. But not here. Not in the end. Let the glories of even this city fade away, and look into God's face without fear, without tears, without death.

And this right here--not heaven, not the holy city, not streets paved with gold, not anything else--this is the promise of hope: that we would see God. Who needs this hope today?

Those who are faithful and enduring in their Christianity; those who have been disciplined in their discipleship and who love Jesus with a full heart and yearn for this moment. You shall receive your reward. This is your full hope.

Who else needs this?

Those who have done terrible wrong, those who have sinned, and are even today. Those who carry shame within them, and this feeling that they have done and caused great suffering in others. You can be redeemed. The gates of the city of God are wide open for you. Come home. This is your true love.

Who else needs this?

And those who are tired, burdened; those for whom God seems a million miles away or just an idea or a memory of a faith they once used to have. Those for whom faith is marginal to their own empire of security and self-reliance. Those who have lost their sight and want to see again. This is your renewed faith.

You will see God's face.

And God's name will be written on your forehead. I don't know exactly what to make of that image. But it is not Caesar's name. You don't belong to him or his way. And it's not Satan's name. You are not evil. It's not even your own name. We are part of something so much bigger, more enduring, more glorious than we are in ourselves. You are God's. All shall be God's. And all manner of thing and all that we were and all that we are and all that we will be is God's in the end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.