Outline for Revelation 21-22

So we have finally arrived: the final outline. By the time we reach the end of these last few pages of outline we will have worked our way in great detail through the entire book of Revelation. The journey that began with the intention of being a nice summer series to carry us over to something new in the Fall has ended up taking nearly a year. Thank you for sticking with me in this journey. It has been a treat going back through work I did in seminary and sharing with you things I have learned. You can rest assured that your thoughts and questions and insights, I have learned at least as much as I have taught. My hope is that parts of this difficult book are clearer to you than they were a year ago. I recognize, however, that some parts of Revelation are really hard to wrap our minds around and will always have a bit of mystery to them as long as we are on this side of eternity; while we are in the state Paul describe in 1 Cor. 13:11-12 of knowing only incompletely. I also hope that you have experienced (or at least started to do so) the blessing available to all those who read and keep the words of this book (1:3).

In this final section we get to see what comes after the end of the world. We have lived (literarily speaking) through the end and are anxiously awaiting a glimpse of what comes next. And we are not disappointed. What we are going to work our way through the remainder of this evening and next week is the images John received of what the final Heaven will be like. The reality is that it will be glorious beyond anything we could ever ask or imagine. The only drawback is that the imagery here fits with the pattern of much of the imagery throughout Revelation: it’s confusing and hard to unravel. But we will do our best and the payoffs will be worth the price.

Revelation 21:1-8: What comes next…

• Would someone read the first eight verses of chapter 21 for us?
• Initial thoughts or questions or insights on these?
• There are several debates regarding the nature of how we should understand these last couple of chapters. One of the major ones comes right out of the gate. What will be the nature of the relationship between the current heaven and earth and the new heaven and earth? John talks about seeing the current heaven and earth “pass away.” What do you think that means?
  o There is a lot of debate here. Specifically, will the new heaven and earth be a complete recreation or a renewal of the current creation? This is a tough question to answer. On the one hand, many of the verses relevant to this discussion seem to point in the direction of the first heaven and earth being completely destroyed in this remaking process. This would seem to lend credence to the idea that God is going to completely do away with the old when He brings in the new. The problem with this is that from some of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 and in some of the descriptions of the new heaven and earth there is definitely going to be some similarities between the two. On a more psychological and theological level, I struggle with the idea that this creation is going to be completely destroyed instead of fully renewed. That would seem to suggest that things here have gotten so bad that there’s nothing left for God to work with. This would seem to point to Satan having done his destructive work so
completely that God can’t undo it. That idea, however, is patently false. If we take anything from the book of Revelation it should be that in the end Satan does not get even a glimmer of a victory. His loss is total and final. Furthermore, in Romans 8, Paul talks about creation crying out for restoration (Romans 8:18-24), but will it not receive this? I have trouble thinking so. So then, which is the right understanding here? Will creation be destroyed and made new or renewed? I don’t know and the text doesn’t make the solution explicitly clear. I personally lean toward the latter, but as with most of my interpretations of this book, won’t be dogmatic about it. Whatever we decide, there is clearly a sense of continuity between the two creations. That is something on which everyone can agree.

- What does it mean that the sea is no more? Do we not get to sit on the ocean and watch the sunrise or set in the new heaven and earth?
  - Well, the smart-aleck answer is no because there won’t be a sun anymore. We’ll talk more about that in a little while. The more direct answer is also, but more tentatively, no. This is not talking about the literal ocean or sea. This is making reference to the metaphorical sea as a place of evil (if you’ll remember, the beast rose up out of the sea). It is also alluding to the sea of glass and glass mixed with fire that surrounded the throne, keeping people at bay. This is basically a description of everything that kept people away from the presence of God is no more. Hallelujah!

- Let me stop here briefly and say this: It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that everything in the entire Bible points to these eight verses. Everything is geared towards the time when the dwelling place of God will be with His people. This is what was promised to the prophet Ezekiel. These are the most hope-filled verses in all of the Bible.

- Throughout the book of Revelation John builds on Old Testament themes. Well, throughout the Old Testament, one of the major themes is the unapproachableness of God. Moses couldn’t see His face. When God came down on the mountain with Moses nothing else could even set foot on the mountain. When the tabernacle was designed and God’s presence filled it, the people couldn’t go in. When the Temple of Solomon was built and God’s presence filled it, the people couldn’t go in. Generally speaking no one could enter the Holy of Holies except on the Day of Atonement and only after a pretty rigorous battery of ritual cleansings. People couldn’t be with God. Then Jesus came and all of that changed. All of a sudden we could be with God through His work on the cross and the ministrations of the Spirit. But even still, we are only able to see as if in a mirror dimly. We are only able to know in part. But when the perfect comes, we will see clearly. Here, the perfect has come. God is final dwelling with His people. We are able to get close to Him. We are able to interact with Him without any of the restraints that currently hold us back. There will be no more sin. We won’t have to worry about mischievous motives getting in the way. We won’t have to worry about destructive desires throwing us off course. All of this will be gone and we will be able to be with God. Hallelujah!

- Take just a moment and think about v. 4. We read and hear this verse from time to time, but I don’t think we often stop and give it much in the way of serious thought. Consider for a minute what this means. No more tears or death or mourning or crying or pain. Can you even imagine such a world? Close your eyes for a minute and try and picture
this. Share if you want, but otherwise just sit for a moment and take it in. Ask God for a vision of this world-to-come. Let this vision sustain you when experiences and circumstances in this life render our vision especially dim.

- The end of v. 6 is a reference to Isaiah 55. Would someone read that chapter for us? How does this strike you?
- Jesus said in John 7 that all those who seek Him will have springs of water flowing out of their bowels. The imagery sounds pretty weird to us today, but the reference was to the River of Life. We can have the fresh streams of living water flowing out of us now by the work of the Spirit of Life. Then we will be able to drink from them without restraint.
- And then this: we will be children of God. Who will this be available to? To the conquerors. The conquerors of what? Conquerors of this world.
- Verse 8 mentions a bunch of people I thought were already gone. Why this reference?
  - This is not referring to some still future judgment. Instead, this is a warning to those who are reading this book today. These are the folks who will not inherit life. Most of these are pretty clear in terms of their disqualification from the kingdom, but why do you think cowards are on the list. What do you think John means by cowards?
  - These would be folks who turn from the message of the Gospel when it gets hard. When the going gets tough, these folks turned and ran. These are the folks who, when the forces of this world sought to make their lives on this side of eternity miserable capitulated because that was way easier than putting up with the stress of temptation and persecution for the rest of their lives. How does it strike you that these folk are identified as cowards? Frankly, it’s tough for me. There are times when I let down in the face of temptation because it’s just easier. There are times when I rely on the cowardice of cynicism instead of taking up the courage of living with the vision and hope of the kingdom. We must live in this life with a spirit of repentance each day. We must throw ourselves completely on the grace and help of Jesus Christ because there is simply no other way through the storm.

Revelation 21:9-22:5 The description of New Jerusalem

- If I can get four people to read this passage: vv. 9-14, 15-21, 22-27, and 22:1-5, we’ll work through these.
- Any initial thoughts or questions?
- If you can remember back to the beginning of chapter 17, what happened there? (Hint: look it up and read the first three verses.) There John saw the embodiment of everything wrong with this world. He saw the physical representation of sin. Now he is given a glimpse of just the opposite.
- What do you think it means that the holy city is coming down out of heaven from God?
  - This is actually an important verse in our theology of heaven. The popular image of heaven is that we will go somewhere else. This comes from the recognition that the planet as it currently exists is most decidedly not ideal. But, when God has made all things new in the great recreation, He will bring heaven here. Heaven will literally be on earth.
- Why the twelve gates? This is probably a reference to the fact that the city will be accessible by everyone.
• What do you think is the significance of the names of the twelve tribes and the names of the twelve apostles? Some folks try and do all kinds of creative guesswork in identifying what exactly these names are. This might be interesting to some folks, but it isn’t very helpful in terms of understanding what’s going on. Instead, this is probably a reference to the city being composed of and founded on the complete people of God from every age of human history. I wouldn’t try to read much more into this than that.

• Why a gold measuring rod? What better with which to measure a golden city?

• The city is described as a cube. It is described as a cube with sides of 12,000 stadia which would be roughly 1,500 miles. That would be a city a couple hundred miles shy of stretching from here to Denver and stretching from our northern border of North Dakota all the way to the southern tip of Texas. Can you even imagine a city of that size? Is there really going to be a city this big?
  ▪ In honesty, as with much of the rest of the book, I lean towards a more symbolic understanding here. In the ancient world, the city was a place of refuge. It was a place where people could work together to be protected from many of the dangers of the country. Also, like the blood of the conquered flowing for 1,600 stadia being symbolic of the entire land of Israel, 12,000 stadia was typically thought to be the distance from the eastern edge of the Roman Empire to the western edge. In other words, the final city will be large enough to hold the entire known world. All believers from every age of human history will have a place in the final Jerusalem.
  ▪ The wall is measured at 144 cubits. In comparison to the length of the city itself, this is pathetic. This would be like the White House having a little white picket fence to keep people off the grounds. It wouldn’t make any difference. So why such a small gate?
    ▪ All cities then had gates. The idea of a gateless city wouldn’t have made any sense for John’s audience. But, this gate is not for protection because there’s nothing to keep out. This gate is simply to demarcate what’s in the city from what’s not in the city. But, from what we see in a few verses, this is not to set the boundaries of what’s in Heaven and what’s not. People come and go freely from the city bringing in their work. This gate, then, serves more of a decorative function.

• What do you think about the phrase “which is also an angel’s measurement”? What does this mean? This is a pretty exciting thing if you think about it. This is describing the fact that heaven has truly come to earth. There is no more disparity between the two. What measures in one place now measures in the other.

• Look over the handout with the gems on it. Can you imagine a city made out of these? Wow. I mean, wow. What do you think is the point of this image? Now, we can certainly take this literally as indicating that the New Jerusalem is going to be composed of all these precious elements. But think about this for a second: are those going to have any value in heaven? They are valuable now because they are rare and because of their monetary potential. Well what difference do you think that’s going to make in heaven? None! The very fact that such materials are going to be used in the construction of a city indicates their commonness there. So perhaps, the point is not that the heavenly city is going to be physically composed of these things, but that it will be beautiful and precious...
beyond all human reckoning. The composition of the city itself is irrelevant. It will be beautiful. It will be amazing. It will be heaven. ‘Nuff said.

- Why is there no temple? To answer this, consider what the purpose of the temple was. It was the place where people could go to commune with God. Generally speaking, temples are places where people go to interact with their deities. Well, if God is going to be present with His people instead of far away in His throne room, then we don’t need a temple anymore. God is the temple in the New Jerusalem.

- Because God will be present, there will be no need for an external source of light. Now, does the text say that there will be no sun and moon in heaven? No, it says there will be no need of them. When God renews creation He will presumably renew all of creation. Why not think that in heaven we will be able to continue exploring the far reaches of the universe? Such activities can be as glorifying to God as anything we do in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings.

- Verses 24-26a seem to indicate that some sort of life will exist apart from the New Jerusalem, that all the residents of Heaven will not be isolated to the great city. What will this look like? We can only guess. Reading a bit into these verses, it would seem that people will be working at something and bringing the product of their labor to God in the city. The image I get is that in heaven we will be able to pursue our hearts desires to their fullest. If someone likes woodworking, he will be able to spend time pursuing this passion to the uttermost. He will be able to take time and create the most spectacular things out of wood he can imagine. And then he will be able to bring them before God as a testament to His glory in creating the wood and the tools and the skills to work with them. This same example can be applied to any other area you can imagine.

- 22:1-5 describe the city as the fulfillment of Eden. In Eden there was a river and the tree of life. Now we see the river of the water of life flowing through the middle of the city and the tree of life is there as well. Also, it was the Curse placed on Adam and Eve that was part of the process of their being expelled from Eden. Here, there is no more curse.

- Other thoughts on these verses?


- If someone will finish the book, we’ll finish our conversation on it.
- Initial thoughts or questions here?
- Let’s just hit the notable parts here and finish up.
- Verse 7 offers us the second-to-last beatitude in the book. “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” How do we do that? What does that mean?
  - These folks remain faithful in the face of persecution. These folks remain faithful and worship God as God regardless of what’s going on around them. These folks resist the Siren-song of this world and remain faithful even when everything else seems to be falling apart. And think about the word “blessed” for just a minute. The one who remains faithful will experience ultimate happiness. This must be a happiness that transcends the things of this world because following God is not always (often?) a happy time as far as this world is concerned. But, this happiness, which we will experience in full in heaven, is not something we have to wait until then to experience. We can experience the joy and peace which surpass all understanding now as we pursue God in the day to day.
In v. 8 John tries to worship the angel again. You think he would have learned his lesson the first time. But, this is such incredible news that the only appropriate response is worship. He simply tries to worship the closest thing he can find—the bearer of the good news. By the way, there is a warning here for us. When we experience exceptionally good news or otherwise experience the greatness of God through something earthly in nature, there is an ever present temptation to worship the mediator of that news or experience. We must resist this every time. This is idolatry. If ever it is a person bringing this news or experience and they don’t immediately reject our worship and turn its focus to God, this person is a false prophet and should be immediately removed from the church.

The angel also reveals that he is no different than we are in God’s sight. The function of angels is to worship and serve God. Our function is to worship and serve God. They do it differently than we do, but they are not better or higher than us. Only different.

Why are the words not to be sealed? Because the time is near. Because all of this is imminent, people need to hear it now. There’s no time to waste.

What do you think of the angel’s words in v. 11?

- This is tough. It could be a statement of determinism. In other words, people who are on a particular path are going to be stuck on that path. But, this could also be a warning to folks who are on the wrong path. There is still time, thankfully, but not much. It is time to get things right so that your end is in the heavenly city and not the lake of fire.

Verse 12 reveals once again that judgment is going to be on the basis of what we have done. We are judged by our works. We are saved by our faith and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Verse 13 is a key verse in your conversations with Jehovah’s Witnesses. JW’s don’t believe Jesus is really the Son of God. They believe He is the archangel Michael. Their translation changes relevant passages in the Gospels which can be used to demonstrate Jesus’ equation of Himself with the Father. But, this is a spot where they missed something big. In the beginning of the book, God identifies Himself as the Alpha and the Omega. It is a title of God’s infinite nature. He is the beginning and the end. Here, Jesus identifies Himself as the Alpha and the Omega. How can they both have the same title? If Jesus is not equal with God then He cannot be the Alpha and the Omega. Either He is or He isn’t. Revelations says He is and I’m going with that one.

The final beatitude pronounces a blessing on all those who have their robes washed—who are made clean in the blood of the Lamb.

The language of being outside the gates aimed at the folks in v. 15 does not conflict with the image of 21:24-26. Instead, this is a reference to folks who are not included in Heaven, in other words, who are in Hell. The language of being outside the gate was exclusionary language in John’s day.

Verses 18-19 are a warning against false teachers. These are folks who would not simply misinterpret the words of Revelation, but who would try to make them say something they don’t in an attempt to lead people away from God. God takes His word very seriously and so should we.

In the end we get the final “Amen.” These words are true and right and we should adjust our lives to them.

Final thoughts and questions?