

## Revelation 20:11-21:8 Study/Teaching Notes

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In teaching Revelation, our goal, with John, is to open up unseen reality. We want people to see - to see the big picture, to see what John sees, and to catch the meaning and impact of what we see with him. It's less about cognitive processing of propositional truth, and more about being captivated by the vision. Understanding symbols and imagery will help us grasp the meaning of the vision(s), but we don't want to get bogged down in details. We need to zoom out to see the big picture, where all the images and elements combine to tell the story and make their impression, where unseen reality counters the propaganda of Rome (then and now) and calls us to follow the victorious slain Lamb and live in light of the New Jerusalem.

We will have taught this passage well if our group sees God's final judgment of all humanity in the broader context of his dealing with evil in our world so that he can finally dwell with his holy people in a new community and creation, and if we are inspired by the hope of what is to come to live as faithful witnesses in the present.

### *Context of this scene in Revelation:*

We come to the final section of Revelation before the epilogue. The dragon Satan has been thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, along with the beasts that were his puppets on earth. Babylon has fallen. The nations of the earth have been freed from the evil trinity that have deceived them, and the people of God from the human systems that oppressed them. With these final visions, "we close forever the chapter on sin" (Mounce) and watch God reunite heaven and earth in a new creation where he will dwell forever with his faithful people.

Series of throne room scenes throughout Revelation:

- 4:1-5:4 throne, elders, creatures, God, Lamb, "Worthy..."
- 7:9-17 great multitude; Lamb will shepherd
- 8:1-4 silence in heaven; prayers of God's people
- 11:15-18 kingdom of world → kingdom of Christ, begun to reign
- (15:1-16:17) Temple in heaven... bowls... It is done. (...Babylon fallen...)
- 19:1-10 Hallelujah! God reigns. Marriage of Lamb come.
- 20:11-15 great white throne & judgment...
- 21:1-22:5 new heaven, earth, Jerusalem - God's dwelling w/ his people

Focus of this throne room scene very different:

- Not worship but judgment
- Event vs. ongoing reality

- Not heavenly beings or the redeemed, but the dead throughout history

*Handout: Revelation 20:11-21:8 in Context*

*Outline for group study:*

- Read aloud
- Individual work with text (observe, context/background, Qs)
- Share together what we're observing (holding on interpretation) & formulate key interpretive questions
- Work in small groups around questions, seeking to answer from text (and context)
- Large group discussion through passage, using interpretive questions
  - Interpreting significance/meaning/message for original audience
  - Implications for us
- Application discussion

*Images in text to (potentially) unpack:*

Note: What follows is simply observation/background work to help you work interpretively with the text. It will not be possible to thoroughly unpack all these images in any study, nor would you want too much time or energy expended in doing so. But the more thoroughly you understand the imagery and symbolism at work, the better you will be able to discern what to share, and which questions and topics that arise to sit with.

*Great White Throne Scene:*

- 20:11ff – Dan 7.9-14
- 20:11 – white: color of purity and victory
- 20:11 – earth & heavens – Is. 51:6; Matt 24:35; 2 Peter 3:10-13
  - Dissolution of tainted creation in prep for new?
  - Poetic imagery: corruptible fleeing presence of God?
- 20:12 – books were opened (scrolls)
  - Books about people's lives culturally familiar. Common idea that angels record deeds.
- 20:12 – book (scroll) of life – Ex. 32:32-33, Psalm 69:28, Daniel 12:1, Malachi 3:16
  - References to the book of life in Revelation: 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 21:27
  - Cities in ancient world had registry of citizens – Lamb/New Jerusalem has one, too? (Ezek. 13:9; Is. 4:3)
  - Dead judged according to deeds as recorded in books – Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10, 23:19; Ezek. 18:30; Rom. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:17
  - But sentenced according to Lamb's book of life
- 20:12-13 – judgment – Exodus 18:13; 2 Cor 5:10

- 20:13-14 – “Hades” parallels OT Sheol, grave, place of dead
  - Rev. 6:8 - “Death & Hades” agents of destruction w/ fourth seal
  - Rev. 1:18 – Jesus holds keys of death and Hades
- 20:14 – “second death” – Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8
- 20:14 – “thrown” – Rev. 12:4, 9, 10, 12, 13, 20
- Jewish assumption: faithful Jews would be saved, along with the few righteous among the Gentiles. This scene, with all humanity, would have been surprising.

#### New Heaven and New Earth:

- 21:1 – new heaven and earth – Isaiah 65:17ff
- 21:1 – “no longer any sea” – place of destruction, chaos, fear, death
  - Place from whence beast came (Rev. 13s)
  - Represented forces of evil & chaos that plot against God & creation seeking to suck creation back to abyss
  - Progression in Revelation: 4, 15, 19
- 21:2 – new Jerusalem (Is. 65:18; Heb. 11:10)
  - Old Jerusalem (Temple) destroyed 70 AD – pious Jews prayed daily for restoration of Jerusalem
  - Israel/Jerusalem as Bride - Isaiah 62:1-5; Ezekiel 16:4-14; Revelation 19:7-9
    - Contrasting the Harlot: 17:1-3 and 21:9-ff
    - Ancient cities often personified as women
  - Holy City – Neh. 11:1, 18; Is. 48:2, 52:1, 62:12
- 21:3 – God’s dwelling place
  - Tabernacle for God to dwell among his people: Ex 25:8, 29:45; 1 Kings 6:12-13; John 1:14
  - Covenant promise: Lev. 26:11-12; Jer. 24:7, 31:1; 31:33, 32:36; Ez. 11:20, 37:23, 37:27-28; Zech 2:11, 8:8
  - “I will be their God and they will be my people” – standard OT covenant motif
  - “They will be his people” should read “...peoples” (It’s plural! *laoi*)
- 21:4 – wipe every tear – Rev. 7:15-17 (Is. 25:8, 35:10, 51:11, 65:16-19; Jer. 31:16)
- 21:5-8 – God speaks! (only other time in book is 1:8 – and possibly 16:1, 17?)
  - Speaks before vision, and at eschatological fulfillment:
    - “I am making everything new.” ... “It is done.” (pl: “They are done.”)
  - 21:6 – Alpha/Omega, beginning/end
    - Divine self-revelation by God in 1:8, 21:6
    - Divine self-revelation by Jesus in 1:17, 22:13
    - Beginning = *arche* (beginning, first, source)
    - End = *telos* (end/goal/purpose, fulfillment)
- 21:6 – spring of the water of life - Isaiah 49:10, 55:1; Jer. 2:13; Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8; John 4:10ff, 7:35-37
- 21:7 – children of God - I John 3:1
  - “Those who are victorious” and “children” both singular (“the one who overcomes/is victorious” and “son”)

- Inheritance – 2 Sam 7:14; Zech. 8:12; Is. 57:13; Ps. 25:13; 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34; 69:36
- In messages to churches, saw that those who overcome/are victorious will:
  - 2:7 eat from tree of life
  - 2:11 not be hurt by 2<sup>nd</sup> death
  - 2:17 receive hidden manna and white stone
  - 2:26 receive authority over the nations
  - 3:5 not have names blotted out of book of life
  - 3:12 be pillars in God's temple
  - 3:21 sit with Christ on his throne
- 21:8 – list of vices
  - Part of promise to God's people – deliverance from enemies/oppressors, evil eradicated in world to come
  - Cowardly, liars – contrasts faithful and true witness of Jesus, to which he also calls his people. First and last on list, gives emphasis, *inclusio* – sins to which church vulnerable, which John challenges out of in Revelation
  - Those frame sins/symptoms of Babylon, outsiders, persecutors of church – or of disciples who have compromised/capitulated
- Genesis 3 → new heaven/earth (further filled out in rest of Rev. 21!)
  - First creation → new creation
  - Ground cursed → new earth; no more curse
  - Exile from garden → God dwells with his people
  - Deceiving serpent; death → lake of fire (Rev. 20)
  - Pain & death → no more
- Note: New Jerusalem as City of God coming down out of heaven as bride just begging for contrast w/ whore of Babylon (chapters 17-18) – gets more explicit in rest of 21!

*Key Interpretive Questions:*

- What is the focus of this throne room scene? How does it follow the others? Why is this here in John's account of his visions?
- How are we to understand judgment from 20:11-15?
- What is the Lamb's book of life? What is its purpose?
- What do the features of the new heaven/earth/Jerusalem tell us about the world to come?
- What is the significance of the dwelling place of God being among his peoples?
- What will the future relationship of the redeemed with God be like?
- What will keep people from this relationship and future?

*Key implications/applications for us:*

- We will be judged according to our deeds *and* under grace.
- Our future together as God's people in a holy city → what should our life together look like now?
- Our future relationship/intimacy with God → what should/can it look like now?
- Our world: the old order will pass away and all things will be made new. Can we imagine that? What does it look like to pray, live, and work into that? To simultaneously trust God to do it, and to collaborate with him in our world now?
- How are we tempted toward the traits listed in 21.8? John issues a call to repent of and resist cowardice (love of life that would prevent faithful witness) and dishonesty (failure of faithful witness) and compromise with or capitulation to the idolatrous systems of this world.
- Resistance - call to confront and challenge the dominant ideology of Rome, embrace a new vision and live into a different future
- Evangelism - Who do you long to see freed from deception to be children of God? What will it look like to share the good news with them?

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