

Revelation 21:1-8 ^{ESV} Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place¹ of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,² and God himself will be with them as their God.³ ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

The New Jerusalem: The Culmination of Hope

One afternoon while coming out of the Jerusalem temple one of Jesus' disciples remarked how beautiful the temple was saying, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And then Jesus dropped a bomb. He prophesied saying, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." In 70 AD that prophecy came to pass. Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian in the first century AD. In his book *The Jewish Wars* he recounts how the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. He writes: "Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury, [Titus] Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple, but should leave the towers standing as they were of the greatest eminence as well as the wall on the west side. This wall was spared, in order to afford a camp for such as were to lie in garrison [in the Upper City], as were the towers [the three forts] also spared, in order to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valour had subdued; but for all the rest of the wall [surrounding Jerusalem], it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came there believe Jerusalem had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind."

Josephus writes further of the utter destruction: "And truly, the very view itself was a melancholy thing; for those places which were adorned with trees and pleasant gardens, were now become desolate country in every way, and its trees were all cut down. Any foreigner that had formerly seen Judea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, could only lament and mourn sadly at so great a change. For the war had laid all signs of beauty quite waste. Nor had anyone who had known the place before, had come on a sudden to it now, would he have known it again. But though he [a foreigner] were at the city itself, he would have inquired for it."

Josephus claims that 1,100,000 people were killed during the siege, of which the majority were Jews, and that 97,000 were captured, enslaved, and most were made gladiators. The Jews that were left mostly fled to areas around the Mediterranean. Titus reportedly refused to accept a wreath of victory, as there is "no merit in vanquishing a people forsaken by their own God".

Building further on that note, the God forsaken note, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed on the last day of the Jewish month of Av (our July), a day they call Tisha B'Av, the Day of Five Calamities. On that same date in 586 BC, the first temple, the temple Solomon built, was destroyed by the Babylonians. In those days the prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw the glory of the Lord leaving the temple in Jerusalem and heading east to be with the exiles in Babylon. A very touching message proclaiming that God had not abandoned his people even though he had cast them off of the land. Seventy years later when a remnant returned none of the prophets in that day claim a vision of the glory of the Lord returning to the temple. Isaiah 65:1 which dates to this time indicates that God didn't want to live in the temple anymore. "Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool. What is this house that you would build for me?" The Lord God apparently did not return to the temple. It was not until Jesus that the presence of the LORD God of Israel again dwelt among his people.

Coming to John in exile on Patmos, he was a Jew and his love for Jerusalem, the Holy City, would have been quite strong. Jerusalem was more than just the symbol of national identity over which people swell with patriotism. The temple was in Jerusalem and to a Jew the Jerusalem temple was the one place on earth where heaven and earth were open to each other. To a Jew the temple symbolized the presence of the LORD God with his people. Therefore, the opposite would be true as well. Jerusalem destroyed, the temple destroyed, and the Jewish people cast forth from the land would have been clear indication that God had not only rejected his people, the blood descendants of Abraham, but abandoned them as well.

Yet as a disciple of Jesus, John had a hope to hold onto. He knew that God was with his people, his people the church, the disciples of the LORD Jesus. The church was now the temple of God because the Holy Spirit dwelt among the people, us included. But, as far as the descendants of Abraham, they had rejected their Messiah and were persecuting his disciples. Therefore, God let all the symbols of their religion fall into Roman hands to be defamed in the

streets of Rome and he let the temple, the symbol of his own presence be destroyed and he cast them forth from the land as judgment upon them.

It is into this context that we must place this climatic vision of John's. He saw a new creation, a new Heaven and a new Earth. The old had passed. It was gone, never to be again. The Greek word for "new" here, *kainos*, is more powerful in its emphasis on utter newness than is the typical Greek word for "new", *neos*. *Neos* is like having a new car. *Kainos* means coming up with an altogether new mode of transportation. The old was gone and the new had come. And then there in the midst of this utterly new creation where heaven and earth are openly now joined as one, where it finally is on earth as it is in heaven, John sees the New Jerusalem coming from God. I suspect that the heart of John the Jew leapt. Like the tower of Babel, God had destroyed the Jerusalem his people had built as a symbol of the name they had made for themselves and sent them asunder. Now God himself is giving a new holy city to his people to symbolize the name that the LORD God had made for them and it was as beautiful as a bride prepared to wed her husband.

Then for the very first time in the Revelation a voice comes from the throne of God saying that God himself is with his people and he himself will comfort them. Not only would a new esteem be given to his people, Jew and Gentile alike, but God would once again be with his people and this time personally, intimately involve himself with each of them to heal and comfort them. God himself will wipe away their tears. Moreover, death will be no more and mourning, crying out, and toilsome suffering will be no more.

Then, God himself speaks, the one seated on the throne declares, "Behold, I am making all things new. Write this down. It is trustworthy and the Truth." This is the most important word spoken in the entire book, indeed in history. God is making all things new. Time in the Book of Revelation is two faceted. John sees what is and what is to be. Sometimes, it's skewed to one side more than the other, but in this passage John is seeing both what God is doing now and what will be in the future. In this world that is a mess, God is presently working to make all things new until the day comes when the old is utterly gone and everything is made utterly new with the glory of God. It may not seem it to us, but behind the scenes of history God is making all things new. That's the Truth; capital "T".

Then God speaks directly to John and it is a message for John to give to his churches in Turkey who are about to undergo great persecution for refusing to call Emperor Domitian Lord. He says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." This means the buck stops with God. The LORD God has the final word in every matter and his final word is all things are being made new; all things on earth will be as they are in heaven. He says to those Christians about to suffer and some even be martyred that the one who conquers, the one who keeps the faith even unto death will be given freely of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Living Water. But, those who cowardly deny Him and in turn resort to a pagan life, they will suffer the bitter fire of judgment for there is nothing left for those who knowing the Truth, turn back from it, who put their hand to the plough and leave it in the field when the ploughing gets tough.

So, what does all this mean for us? Well, this vision of the new heaven and the new earth and especially the New Jerusalem are the culmination of our hope. We, who are born of the Holy Spirit and united to Jesus and to each other in him and share in Jesus relationship to the Father so that we know the steadfast love and faithfulness of God and drink of the very communion of love that the Trinity, the LORD God is, we are the new Jerusalem in the making. Therefore, we, the church, are a signpost of the Trinity's working to make all things new. Love one another. It's important. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Give home to the homeless. Clothe the naked. Visit the prisoner. Care for the orphaned and the widowed. It's important. Those are actions that point to the coming new creation and indeed will endure into it and be perfected. As Paul said the work we do in the Lord is not in vain.

Speaking more personally, just as God destroyed Jerusalem and thereby destroyed their idolatry even though it was idolatry of God, except God made in man's image, so does God strip us of our religion to teach us faith, hope, and love. I cannot help but believe that this is the reason why the North American church is shrinking. We who endure and do not turn back will and do drink of the of the fountain of the water of life as Jesus freely gives it to us.

Finally, there are times in life when things have gone so unexpectedly bad – death, divorce, broken friendships, family falling apart, work coming to an end – times that seem as if God has rejected and abandoned us and left us to suffer, and most times its of our own doing. These are times when God is making our lives new and drawing closer to himself so that he himself can wipe away our tears. The LORD God be praised. Amen.