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Coming Down From God Out of Heaven

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Thoughts on the New Jerusalem

Reading: Revelation 21 & 22

The next great event in God's calendar is the return in glory of His Son Jesus Christ. It is the consummation of that coming and the final revelation of the glory of Christ which is shown to us in the form of this heavenly city, "coming down from God out of heaven". This bridal city represents the sum of God's working through the ages. Its many symbols display the features of His Son as they have been wrought into the people whom He has taken out of the nations for His name, a marvellous union of Christ and His Church which has a timeless task of ministering life to the universe. The nations are to walk in its light, and they are to find the maintenance of their health from the leaves of its tree; kings are to bring their treasure into this city, and God's glory will provide its radiance.

John twice affirms that the city was shown to him by God - "He showed me...". Perhaps as we humbly read and meditate God will show us something of its significance and importance, and by means of its symbols give us a clearer idea of the unseen and eternal things which we are to keep in view so that "our light affliction" may work for us "more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

The Street

The Authorised Version makes a break between the first two verses of Revelation 22 which is misleading. The Revised Version indicates that the river is in the midst of the street of this holy city.

The single street is central; a river runs down the middle of the street, and the tree of life grows on either side of the river. Nothing is in the plural, not even this tree, though it is found on both sides of the river. Up to this point things have been in the plural. Life has many ways of expressing itself, as the many trees of Ezekiel's river show (Ezekiel 47:4). At the end, however, everything is gathered up into an absolute unity: one city, one street, one river and one tree. It is a symbolic reminder that at the last all will be summed up into a perfect oneness, the oneness of Christ.

Such unity can only be realised in the fellowship of the Spirit, but this is surely not only for the future but for today. The city is being spiritually formed now, and the work is going on now in preparation for the great consummation which it reveals; if the Church is to be God's metropolis with an eternal vocation at the centre of the universe, then here and now it must learn oneness with and in Christ. One street! This oneness, right down at the very core of the Church, is basic to its present witness as well as to its eternal vocation. The one street has one river, which means that from the inner realm of fellowship with Christ there is an outflow of life. The city is, of course, the ultimate goal to which the Holy Spirit is moving, but the same law holds good for all time. Our vocation on this earth here and now is not primarily to engage in a number of good works, but to provide a way by which the life of Christ may flow out to others. How can this happen finally if it is not beginning now? How can we enthuse about ultimate unity if we are not giving diligence here and now to keep the unity of the Spirit?

This being the case it hardly needs to be pointed out that the enemy's strategic movement against the purpose of God in the Church is to keep that Church divided, basically divided. He does not mind mere professions of unity, nor is he unduly troubled by external illusions of unity; but what he is set against is the deep-down inwrought oneness which will release God's great river of life to flow out to a needy world. "I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" were the words of introduction which led John to see the great heavenly and holy Jerusalem in its glorious unity. Undivided love for Christ, as the love of the bride for her husband, is the only sure counter to Satan's wiles, and the only basis for real oneness.

The Golden Reed

The city was measured with a golden reed, everything in it being seen to conform to God's measurements. The whole idea is divine, and it can only be measured by divine standards, for it is to express divine purpose. Our calling in Christ makes many demands upon us, but if we can only view them in the light of things eternal, it will be much easier to face them. Not that it is ever easy for our human nature to be dealt with in accordance with this golden rod of divine standards but we can more readily bear the cost if we keep God's end in view. An outstanding characteristic of the city is its absolute clearness. This is true of its way of life, for the water of its river is as clear as crystal. It is true of its substance, which is of pure gold made like unto clear glass. It is true of its light, which is described as being "like a jasper stone, clear as crystal". This stone is also said to be "most precious", which suggests that such a condition of transparency is very precious to the Lord.

It also implies that we, His people, will find it a costly quality, one which can only be experienced as we accept discipline under the hand of God, and are given a spiritual education which makes us refined and Christlike. This clearness is not merely negative, a sort of stainless condition, but it is unshadowed and unclouded light. God is light: Christ is the light of the world, and the ministry of the Church is both to receive and to transmit His light. The city is radiant with the glory of God. What is the opposite of glory? It is darkness, cloudiness, murkiness; it is all that realm which is not clear, but mixed and shadowy. If you have had to deal with a person whom you cannot trust because of hidden elements which if not actually deceitful somehow lack clear transparency, you will have

found it an unpleasant experience, the very opposite of glory. When the glory of God fills everywhere, then there are no such questions or shadows, but perfect, open confidence. "In Him is no darkness at all..." (1 John 1:5). This glory is ours, by grace, and must govern all our ways.

All the portals of the city are of pearl. Pearls are a parable of the preciousness which results from suffering, since they are formed as a result of the agony of the host creatures. These pearls are the only gates. There is no other way into this city than by suffering love, for the elect people who are to reign with Christ are those who have first shared something of His sufferings. It is no use our opting for a casual or easy way into fellowship of this kind, for the love of Christ, purified from all mixture and precious to God demands a committal to Him for His supreme purpose to be fulfilled even though the cost may be fiery trial or deep travail. Let us not be deterred by the cost though, but keep our eyes on the outcome - "having the glory of God". This is our destiny.

The Wall

A further characteristic of this embodiment of God's thought is the fact that the city has a wall "great and high". Much is said about this wall, with repeated mention of its foundations, its dimensions and its strength. It seems to depict the city's distinctiveness. It is true that walls are often used for purposes of defence, but as such a need could never arise with the heavenly city, we conclude that the wall represents a demarcation of what God wishes to be distinguished in a special way. Do you not agree that there is much weakness in Christianity today just by reason of a lack in distinctiveness of testimony and life? Not that God will allow us to think in terms of spiritual conceit or imagined superiority, but it is important that we should not lose that sense of definite purpose and set-apartness which should always govern the life of His redeemed people.

The wall is beautiful; it is high; and it is strong. It marks off in clear delineation that which has special meaning and value to God.

Adorned

"Coming down from God out of heaven, adorned...". If this city is to be the embodiment of eternal values, if it is not a thing but a people, then something must have been happening to shape and prepare them so that such a condition could be possible. You will notice that the wall of the city is adorned, and also that the adornment of the city itself is spoken of as being suitable for a bride. The wall is no ugly demarcation but its very foundations are adorned with all manner of precious stones. The costly gems are simply symbols of the many-sided preciousness of Christ. "For you therefore that believe is the preciousness" (1 Peter 2:7), the very preciousness of Christ Himself.

And the bride is also adorned. Her adornment is something more than external splendour which can be put on and taken off; her beauty consists of those inward qualities which delight the heart of her heavenly Bridegroom. "The king's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold" (Psalm 45:13). We are apt to pay such attention to externalities, even in spiritual things, but God's objective is a people whose inner life is beautiful with the pure gold of Christ's loveliness, for Christ is coming "to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe" (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

If these adornments come down from heaven, how did they first get there? They are the outcome of our walk with God here on earth. We live our lives down here, and although we frequently get discouraged, we do enter into new experiences of God's grace and learn more of His Son. The Word teaches us that something is happening all the time in relation to our life down here which is

equivalent to treasure which is going ahead of us and waiting for us to follow. As we proceed on our way with the Lord there are heavenly values accumulating for the future. Did not the Lord Jesus tell us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20)? So while there is a temporal life, there are also values being stored up in heaven, features of Christ which will adorn His city. Our spiritual growth, our spiritual characteristics are, as it were, going ahead of us. They are eternal: they are not of time. And all this preparation is going on, so we are told, "while we look... at the things which are not seen... but eternal".

"Adorned as a bride for her husband". What the Lord is doing in us now as daily we learn new lessons of grace and humility, will be manifested in that day, and although this may bring gratification to us and joy to others, it is primarily meant for the pleasure of Christ. The Church's spiritual adornment is to be the reward to our Bridegroom-Redeemer for all His patient, suffering love.

The city descends from heaven, that is, it has been conformed to heaven. It has not been turned out of heaven because it is not suitable, but comes down to bring heaven's values into the rest of God's universe. We must measure everything down here by values which are heavenly and eternal. This brings us back again to the golden reed of God's standards, the reed which measures everything in the light of God's purpose of showing the greatness of His Son to a wondering universe by means of the Church which is in living, loving communion with Him. This is the end of all things. This is where the Bible closes. And this is our vocation in Christ.