

INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION - PART TWENTYONE

All our problems - false teaching, compromise, the world, the flesh and the Devil - which caused so much suffering in the first century, and have done ever since, will finally have been dealt with. But what is ahead for Christians? The answer according to Revelation is a wedding. Back in chapter 19:9 we received a wedding invitation, but like most engagements there were major problems to overcome first.(19,20) At last we are ready for the big day! The stage is set.(21:1) Amazing preparations have been made - a whole new world is ready. The total destruction of the present earth, as described in II Pet.3:7-13, will prepare the way for a new world. Whether the end of the old earth and atmosphere will be the result of a nuclear holocaust as rebellious man's final act of self injury, or direct action from a holy God, we are not told. The exciting part is the new world which will take its place. What bothers Christian sailors and fishermen is the lack of a sea in the new world. They had thought of heaven as the ultimate opportunity to enjoy their favourite sports. At the same time there will definitely be water because of the river described in 22:1. Where will the river run to? The sea as we know it now is not as God originally intended it to be. It has become high in salt and other contaminants, and a place of danger and destruction. What does God have in mind? Wait and see! It will be even better.

The bride finally arrives for the wedding, the only bride to appear on time! She is pictured as a city, the new Jerusalem. A similar illustration has been used in Gal.4:26 where the contrast was between God's people as they were, living by self effort, and God's people as they will be, living in the good of God's promises. The marriage is both an arranged one, planned by the bridegroom's Father, and a love match based on a love so great that the bridegroom was willing to die for His bride.(Eph.5:25-32) God is now Master of Ceremonies at His Son's wedding as He begins by announcing what this ceremony is all about. Its purpose is to make it possible for God to live in and among us, belonging completely to Him.(21:3) It will be a marriage without sorrow, pain or death in contrast to the relationship which followed Adam's rebellion.(21:4; Gen.3:16-19) There will be no bad memories of sin. (21:5) The married couple will be faithful to each other for ever, and the marriage always utterly satisfying.(21:6) We are part of the bride simply on the basis of victory in Christ.(2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21)

Excluded from the wedding are a whole list of people showing behaviour totally unacceptable to God.(21:8) The list began with the two key problems from which all the rest stem, the cowardly and unbelieving. All sin begins with unbelief.(Jn.16:8,9; Rom.14:23) It takes courage to trust God rather than ourselves. Some of the behaviour which followed is against God and some against man. All deserve the same fate as that reserved for Satan, the harlot and the 2 beasts. Don't take sin lightly.

After the Master of Ceremonies has explained what the marriage will mean to those who are part of it, an usher, one of the angels already mentioned in 15:1 and 17:1 took John to see the bride.(21:9,10) She is a city of enormous dimensions and the very best materials.(21:11-17) Many millions of people from all over the earth and all of history make up the church. In the Garden of Eden, Adam's bride was one woman; now the bride of the last Adam is a great multitude. The history of man's failure with its terrible consequences, and of God's redemption, has all been worthwhile. This is why God patiently puts up with our sin.

The description of the city was rich in familiar symbols from throughout the Bible. The walls are jasper, like God Himself in 4:3; we are to show Him. The covering is gold, His resources,(3:18) because it is all His work. There are 12 gates on 4 sides like the arrangement of the 12 tribes around the tabernacle in Num.2, because He is to be central among Jewish believers. There are twelve foundation stones because Jesus used twelve apostles to preach the gospel to New Testament believers. The 12 gates are each made from one pearl because they picture God's wisdom,(Job 28:18) by which all believers come to Him, though not everyone comes to the gospel message from quite the same direction. The foundations are decorated with 12 precious stones similar to those which covered the breastplate of Aaron in Exod.28:17-20. Each stone represented a tribe, each one belonged to God, but each is uniquely beautiful.(21:11-14;18-21)

What is equally fascinating is what is not there. There is no temple because God now lives in us. There is no night; because there is no darkness with God.(I Jn.1:5; I Thess.5:4,5) There is no sun or moon, because He is the light of the world,(Jn.9:5) now seen clearly. This presumably explains why, in Gen.1, there was light for 4 days before the sun was created. The gates are never closed because there is no more fear. There is nothing dirty, immoral or deceitful because there is no more sin.(21:22-27) The one ground for being there is having our names written in the Lamb's book of life, based on our acceptance of what He, not us, has done.

The city is built, not as a solid block, but as an open square, within which is a garden like the garden at the beginning of the Bible. There is a river which comes as it probably did in Gen.2:10 from the throne of God.(Ezek.47:1) The life of the Spirit of God flows out of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.(Jn.7:37-39) The tree of life is no longer a single tree to feed two people with the life of Christ. It has become a long avenue of trees, each continually fruitful as we are to be continually fruitful.(Gal.5:22,23; II Tim.4:2) Their leaves will heal the divisions between nations present since Babel.(22:1,2; Gen.11; Ezek.47:12) Life will no longer be spoiled by the curse of sin.(22:3) God will no longer be obscured from our sight; our thinking will be entirely His thinking.(22:4) He will be our light; all will be clear; He will be unchallenged; we will have authority; all this will last for ever.(22:5)

The vision of eternity, the unchanging now, fitted into time on suffering Earth, whether in the first century or any other century, has now been completed. The rest of the book is a series of summing up comments. First the angel added his reminder - the message is true, will work out in the immediate future, and can be a means of blessing right now.(22:6,7; 1:3) John added his testimony to the truth of what he had written, and acknowledged that he repeated a previous mistake by worshipping the messenger rather than the Lord.(22:8,9; 19:10) We can make the same mistake. The angel gave a further reminder that the purpose of this vision was to encourage Christians in unashamedly Christ-like living. (22:10-11) Jesus then spoke again summing up His plan - to come again to reward believers, and judge unbelievers. He is always the same.(22:12,13; Heb.13:8) There is a simple choice - be clean through His blood and therefore be enjoying His life as at the beginning, or continue in our loathsome behaviour without Him.(22:14,15) He now confirmed the words of the angel with two pictures used earlier which spoke of His resurrection power and authority, and His purpose to bring light into a dark world.(22:16,17; 2:28; 5:5)

The Holy Spirit and the bride, the church, added their invitation to be part of the wedding and so satisfy our thirst for His life.(22:17) John closed with a terrible warning to anyone who meddles with God's word by addition or subtraction. The Bible is all true and stands alone.(II Tim.3:16,17) Jesus is coming and we look forward to Him taking over the earth but remember - grace means He wants to come into us and every situation we face right now. The blessing of eternity is for today's problems and opportunities.(22:18-21)