

The New City | Revelation 21:9-21

The end is near! The *end*, I mean, of our year-long journey through *Revelation*. And like any good book, to fully appreciate how a story *ends*, it's helpful to reflect on how it *began*—not just *Revelation*, but the whole *Genesis-to-Revelation* story of God's relationship with humanity. So, we're going begin with a longer-than-normal deep-dive into our story's background.

In the beginning, God made the world in a 7-day process of bringing *order* out of *chaos*. less about God making *something* out of *nothing*, and more about God bringing *order* and *life* to a reality that was, **“formless and empty.”** (1:2) The cosmos was a wild wasteland—*unformed* and *unfilled*. So, in the first 3 days of Genesis 1, God organizes the unformed chaos into a well-ordered eco-system—separating *night* and *day*, *earth* and *sky*, *water* and *dry land*. Then in days 4-6, God *fills* the now *formed* spaces with sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, beasts, and the crowning-jewel: *humanity*. And on the seventh day, seeing how good it all was, God *rested*.

Some have tried to discredit the Bible's reliability, saying its *creation* account doesn't stand up to the scrutiny of *science*, but the text simply isn't trying to compete in that space; it'd be like expecting a *cookbook* to explain *chemistry*. *It's just not even trying to*. In fact, the best and most recent Biblical scholarship suggests Genesis is actually depicting the *construction* and *commissioning* of a cosmic *temple*. Ancient temples were *designed* as elevated structures with elaborate gardens, *decorated* with gold and precious gems, and *dedicated* in 7-day ceremonies. Finally, an *idol* was placed inside the temple, and the deity's presence came to *rest* upon it.

A careful reading of Genesis reveals Eden, not as a place you can find on a map, but as an elevated mountain-garden, planted somewhere *between* earth and heaven, with rivers flowing down to water the world below. Its location isn't *geographical*, but *theological*—a place where heaven and earth collide; where God and humanity can walk together in intimate friendship.

Genesis 2:12 says, “***the gold of that land is pure; pearls and lapis lazuli are also there.***”

A temple, decorated with gold, *prized on the land*; pearls, *treasure of the sea below*; and Lapis Lazuli, a gemstone the ancients believed formed the blue dome above us; a thin layer separating heaven and earth. Again, this isn't *geology*; it's *theology*. The prophet, *Ezekiel* later envisioned:

“[Humans] were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: carnelian, chrysolite and emerald, topaz, onyx and jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared.” (Ezekiel 28:12-13)

Designed as a sacred mountain-garden, and *decorated* with gold and precious gems, the Eden-temple's construction is completed as God places an *image* inside: *humanity*. The Hebrew word for *image* here is most commonly translated elsewhere as, *idol*. And with the *idol* in place, God's presence finally comes to *rest* within Eden—*rest* not as *sleep*, but *settling in*; *resting upon*.

In this temple, humanity is presented not merely as God's *idol* or *image*; they're also dedicated as God's *priests*, commissioned in Genesis 2:15, “***to work it and keep it.***” The words, *work* and *keep*, are the same two-word job description later given to Israel's priests, defining their sacred responsibilities to *work* and *keep* God's holy space. But long before any temple in Jerusalem, Eden was the original cosmic mountain-garden *temple*, with *humanity* as its *priests*.

As the story continues, sin infiltrates and corrupts the creation-temple. But God invites Israel to be a *new* Eden-people; a “***kingdom of priests.***” (Ex 19:6) Exodus records the dramatic scene where God formalizes this relationship on *another* sacred mountain, *Mt. Sinai*, in a cosmic *wedding* ceremony—God the *groom*; Israel, the *bride*. Like Genesis 1, God speaks *seven* times, and invites Moses to pass through the thin blue cosmic-veil and enter into God's space, where the floors are made of *Lapis Lazuli*—the same sky-blue we see when looking up.) What Moses sees, God calls a *pattern*; a *blueprint* for a building. (*The newlyweds are moving in together!*)

“Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.” (Ex 25:9)

Now, I can’t even follow IKEA directions! The *Tabernacle* was to be a replica of *heaven*; a portable miniature working-model of *paradise*, decorated to resemble *Eden*, with trees, flowers, and images of animals, *just like in Eden*, an east entrance, *just like Eden*, two cherubs guarding it, *just like Eden*, and a candelabra, designed to resemble *Eden’s Tree of Life*. But its most sacred space was the *innermost* room—the *Holy of Holies*, where the unfiltered, undiluted presence of God *rested*—a place where *only* the high-priest could enter, *only* briefly, *only* once a year, *only* while wearing garments of gold, pearls, and precious gems, *only* after undergoing strict, ritual purification. The *Holy of Holies* was where *God’s* space and *human* space intersected and overlapped in a single *shared* space; heaven and earth joined together in a holy singularity.

Years ago, I did work for an Austrian firm that creates content for a pharmaceutical giant. To celebrate our work, the owner flew in and treated us to a dining experience at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto called, *The Chef’s Table*. In fancy restaurants, the *Chef’s Table* is a small space, in between the *dining room* and *kitchen*; it’s *both* kitchen *and* dining room. You don’t order; the chef personally creates the meal, curating each course, flavour, and pairing, like a culinary tour guide, drawing your attention to every exquisite detail and delicacy. It’s them on a plate.

The *Holy of Holies* in the tabernacle was like a spiritual *Chef’s Table*; a unique, shared space, seen as both *in heaven* and *on earth*; an *in-between* place where God and priest came together for a curated sacred meal. In this way, God dwelt with Israel, as *bride* and *groom*.

The tabernacle was eventually replaced with a more permanent structure—the *temple*. But the temple, *like Eden*, was infiltrated and corrupted by priests and kings who, among other things, used the temple courtyard as royal burial grounds, turning its *gardens* into a *graveyard*. So, God allowed Babylon to conquer Israel. While exiled, Ezekiel has a vision where he’s carried

to a *high mountain* and sees the *temple* priests secretly worshipping the serpent. He learns of God's plan to let Babylon *destroy* the temple. Years later, *still in exile; the temple now destroyed*, Ezekiel is again taken in a vision to a *high mountain* and shown a *new* temple; not a physical structure, but another *pattern*. He's told to *measure* this *new* temple pattern, its dimensions and symmetrical design explained to represent God's ordering of chaos at creation, making it a hospitable dwelling for God and humanity. This temple-vision was a reminder of God's ongoing desire for shared space to dwell with us—in a place where God's presence shapes everything.

After the exile, Israel came home and rebuilt the temple, but it wasn't the same. In fact, we're told, ***"many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw [it]."*** (Ezra 3:12) The glory was gone, never to return.

Until *Jesus*. John's gospel introduces Jesus as God ***"dwelling among us."*** (John 1:14) The word *dwelling* is literally the word *tabernacle* as a verb. He's saying God *tabernacled* among us in Jesus. God's space and our space intersecting and overlapping in one person—fully God *and* fully human—God *with* us; the true reality the *pattern* only pointed. So, imagine the drama as Jesus walks into that rebuilt temple and begins flipping tables. The priests wanted to kill him, but he replied, ***"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*** (John 2:19) *Which is just what happened!* They destroyed the temple of his body on the cross, only to see it rebuilt in resurrection splendor 3 days later, calling his followers unite with him as his *body* and *bride*—a new *temple*-people. That's how the New Testament sees the *church*, saying, ***"Don't you know that [y'all] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"*** (1Cor3:16), calling us, ***"living stones... being built into a temple of the Spirit, to be a holy priesthood."*** (1 Pet 2:5)

The church is the Eden-ideal reborn as a new cosmic *temple* and *priesthood*.

And *now*—*finally*, I invite you to open your Bibles to [Revelation 21](#), where John writes:

**“[An angel] said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’
And he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high...” (Revelation 21:9-10a)**

As John describes being led like Ezekiel to a *high mountain*, he’s signaling something not *geographical*, but *theological*; setting our expectations for what’s about to happen. From this mountaintop, he gets a behind-the-scenes glimpse of Christ’s bride on their wedding day. The church imagined as a *bride* is a PG-13 way of talking about the intimate love that unites us with Jesus, as the two (in the words of [Gen 2:24](#)) **“become one flesh”**. In fact, when Paul instructs us to love our spouses, he can’t help but see the connection, writing of spousal intimacy, **“This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”** ([Eph 5:32](#)) It’s a mysterious spiritual *and* physical uniting of *heaven* and *earth*—*God* and *humanity*, coming together as one.

John also describes seeing the bride as, **“the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God”** ([Rev 21:10](#)) The *Holy City* was a very specific way of identifying *Jerusalem* as synonymous with the *temple*. So, for clarity, John sees a *bride* who’s a *city*, but also a *temple*. It’s a *metaphor-salad* meant to bring all these images into one cosmic portrait of *the church* in the final age. And notice, John doesn’t see a bunch of disconnected souls floating into the clouds to live with God in some disembodied ethereal existence; he sees the bride-city-temple-church *coming down from heaven to earth*, like a bride coming down the aisle on their wedding day.

Maybe, like me, you were raised to believe *this world is not my home; I’m only passing through*. It’s a distorted brand of Christianity that sees the world as evil and bad, a reality from which God will rescue us by destroying it and taking our souls—*that invisible, immaterial, inner us*—up to heaven. As if, in [John 3:16](#), Jesus actually said, **“For God so loathes the world that whoever believes in Jesus, will go to a better place one day.”** But that’s *not* what he said, or what the Bible teaches. The Bible presents the world as God’s *good* creation that, having been taken

prisoner by sin—*infected as with a terminal illness*—must be liberated and healed. Reborn, not rejected; delivered, not discarded. Like us, this world will undergo a kind of a death, but will be resurrected in a new heaven-and-earth creation. Reality 2.0—fully restored. Jesus didn't die so we could go to *heaven*; he rose to bring heaven down to us. That's how Jesus saves the world.

This world isn't a *rental*—a disposable dumpster-fire we're destined to escape with our noses plugged. Jesus said God *LOVES* this world, teaching us to pray for God's *will* and *work* to be done *on earth*, just as it is in heaven. To begin ushering heaven's realities down to earth, as co-labourers with Christ in the reunification of the cosmos; merging our space with God's space, until the whole world increasingly becomes a shared space of sacred love. The Bible's vision of the church is not one of religious escapism, but of full engagement—a people reborn to play a crucial role in the reshaping of reality. When we let the way of Jesus influence our values and choices, we are participating the healing and redemption of the world. And if that feels like an awfully big vision... *welcome to church!* Just listen to how John describes the magnitude of it:

“The angel... had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long.” (Rev 21:15-16)

The world's tallest building is the [Burj Khalifa](#) in Dubai, standing over half-a-mile high. It's an incredible feat of human engineering, but *this* city rises 3,000 times higher at 1,400 miles! Roughly the distance from *Toronto* to *Texas*, it extends outward as *long* and *wide* as it is *high*. Scholars estimate that its surface area would cover roughly the entire inhabited world at the time. In other words, John sees a global city, big enough for everyone—no suburbs, no outskirts, no outsiders. But more revealing than its *size* is its *shape*; equal in height, length, and width—a perfect *cube*. Now, there's only one other *cube*-shaped object in the entire Bible... *any guesses?*

“The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty wide and twenty high.” (1 Kings 6:20)

The *Holy of Holies*! The sacred innermost room in the temple—a perfect *cube*! That’s what all this *measuring* is about; that through the church, the world will one day be saturated, filled with the undiluted, unfiltered, high-potency presence of God—just like the *Holy of Holies*, just as it was in *Eden*, just *as it is in heaven*. An eternal chef’s table, where God’s and our space overlap. Not just in a small cube-shaped room, but *everywhere*. Not just for one priest only, but for *everyone*. Not just a once-a-year encounter, but *every moment*. God *with us*—no curtain or veil, just a bride and groom—intimate and inseparable; one flesh. A living, loving temple.

One last note about the measuring... The precise nature of the measurements have led some to think this must be a literal image; some translators even converting the measurements into miles and metres for modern readers, obscuring their true meaning. But keen observers may recall that we’ve seen these numbers before in Revelation—144 and 12,000. Earlier, they referred to the redeemed people of God from every nation, tribe, and tongue; the *church*. John even adds, curiously, that the angel uses a *human* measurement. (*The cubit is a length based on the human body*) It’s like the city is constructed not of bricks, but of bodies, as a living temple.

Having explored its *dimensions*, John describes its *décor*—it’s *form* now being *filled*.

“The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations... were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.” (Revelation 21:18-21)

The gemstones of Eden—the glittering prize of earth, sea, and sky. Once worn by priests, a reminder of humanity’s true glorious glow, they now bedazzle the foundations of the church.

In Ephesians, Paul describes the church as a temple **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets”** (Eph 2:20)—both the *new-* and *old-*testament messengers of faith. John

tells us the city's foundations are inscribed with, "**the names of the twelve apostles**" (21:14) and that on its gates (each individual *pearls*), are "**the names of the twelve tribes of Israel**," (21:12), honouring Israel as the gateway through which Jesus was born to open the door to the kingdom. The city's streets—*like the original temple floors*—are gold, so pure it's see-through. Gold, pearls, and precious gems—we're back in the Eden; the church, a new garden-temple.

Having revealed what *forms* and *fills* the city, John now tells us what's *not* there—no *physical* temple. The pattern is no longer needed; bride and groom tabernacle together forever. No sun or moon either, like how, in Genesis 1, God says, "**Let there be light**," and God's glory illuminates the cosmos, even though the sun, moon, and stars aren't made until Day 4. There's no night; darkness and evil have been extinguished. And with the dark and dread of night gone, there's no need for security; the gates remain open to receive tributes of the nations' treasures. And best of all, there's no sin. We worship God alone; no idols. We fully love our neighbours; no impure relationships. And with Satan destroyed, no one is deceived away from trusting God.

I began by saying that to fully appreciate a story's *ending*, you need to consider how it *begins*. Well, today, we need to appreciate that, how our story ends, has its beginning in *us*—here, today. Christ is *already* with us; we're *already* Christ's body and bride, each of us a mini-temple; together one glorious temple made of living stones, each one as precious as the next, glowing reflections of the glory of God. The Eden-temple reborn and rebuilt in *us*. The church isn't the *building in* which we are spiritually formed and missionally engaged by Jesus; it's the *people with whom* we are spiritually formed and missionally engaged by Jesus; forming a new *Holy of Holies*—not a *cube-shaped room*, but a *Christ-shaped community*—the beginnings of God's full and final vision for the world, bringing heaven down to earth, renewing the whole of creation. Friends, the church is the *means* to God's *end*—an *end* that's not just *near*; it's *here*!

But if our brand of faith has us *'just passing through'* this life, we need to wake up and realize that God made us, not for *somewhere out there*, but for *here and now*. To be *formed* and *filled* as part of God's good new-creation; a living *temple* where God's Spirit *rests*. The question is, what's forming and filling me these days? Are the dimensions of my life ordered like a temple? My days designed around communion with God, community with each other, and contributing to compassion and justice? Is my life constructed on a foundation, not of *gold*, but of *grace*? Decorated, not with *lapis lazuli*, but with *loyal love for others*? Am I—are we—a priceless pearl-like gateway into God's Kingdom? We are called to serve as God's priests, to *work* and *keep* the way of Jesus with *temple*-like devotion, to walk with God in intimate friendship, and work with the Spirit to daily make our space a little more like God's space.

Practically, this means a few things. First, as we learn to live like temples, fostering daily devotion; creating sacred space in which to be formed and filled by Jesus. Additionally, it means being a regular, active participant in the broader temple experience, showing up consistently on Sundays, but also engaging in community building, as well as the missional work of the church. Because, finally, it means remembering that God's main critique of the old temple was how, while they sacrificed and sang, prayed and preached, the poor and powerless went mostly unnoticed and un-cared-for. Here at Southridge, we want to be the kind of temple that embodies both spiritual formation *and* missional engagement, blending both *passionate worship* and *compassionate work*. Because that's the kind of temple in which God desires to dwell.

Finally, the band comes back to lead us in a response... I want to invite all of us today to the ultimate *Chef's Table*. To dine on life's true delicacy—the bread of Christ's presence and the cup of his covenantal love. The table is set for us to absorb Christ's *immeasurable* love, and be *formed* and *filled* into a true temple-people. *Holy Spirit, come*. Let's pray.