

## **River of Life**

### Revelation 22:1-5

Have you ever sat around and thought about what the perfect world would be like? If you could envision a place, or an environment in which all of the nagging problems of life had been dealt with permanently, and all that was left is good stuff, what would it look like?

Can you envision a world where there is no war or sickness, or even work to do? Can you envision a world where there are no more lingering questions about who God is or what God is or what God's doing in the world?

People have been dreaming up this kind of thing ever since we've had the capacity to do so. But people tend to do more of this kind of dreaming when they're desperate, when they see little hope in the world, and when they don't see any way that life can get any better.

When things are that bad, people tend to react by thinking about what it would be like if all the insurmountable problems they faced were effectively solved. For instance, what would it take for us to solve the problem of hunger in the world? What would that solution look like?

If you could envision a world where people no longer feel a need to go to war with one another, how would you envision bringing that about? What would the world look like if we knew there would never be another war?

People of faith have been wrestling with these questions for as long as we know, and many of them still are. One group that has gained some media attention is called "Christian Dominionists."

These folks believe, as we do, that God does not want the world to be plagued by all the problems that we face. They also believe, as we do, that God wants to work through Christians to address these kinds of problems.

They have identified "seven mountains", seven aspects of modern society that Christians can change for the better if they're given the opportunity: education, the media, business, family, religion, arts, and government.

The way they talk, the world would be made perfect if you and I were to agree to implement their ideas about how to fix the problems we face in these seven mountains. And the language they use to describe their vision of a perfect world is "dominion".

The implementation of their ideas would mean that God, or at least Christians, have dominion over the world because their ideas won the day and the problems would be solved.

While we all want a better world, that kind of language scares people, and these dominionists are trying to get away from that kind of language because it sounds like they want to take of the world for Christ.

They don't want to take over the world. They just want everyone to follow their vision and be amazed at how perfect the world becomes in a short amount of time. But I want you to be aware that these people are not some insignificant group.

One former vice presidential candidate was very involved with this organization, and one current presidential hopeful recently appeared at a widely publicized prayer service which was endorsed and led by these dominionists. So they have access to a lot of power.

Now I don't agree with their vision for solving the problems of the world because their solutions sound a lot like the kinds of solutions that haven't worked in the past. But they are at least thinking about the problems of the world and wondering what the world would look like if God solved all of our problems, or least worked through the church to solve our problems.

When I read the last chapter of Revelation, it's clear to me that the people to whom this book was written were also looking for some idea of what the world would look like if God were to swoop in and deal effectively with all the problems they faced.

The author, who identifies himself as John, tries to paint a picture of what that would look like, though it's drastically different from the image we get from the dominionists.

Part of the reason why John writes about this perfect world is because his readers are probably suffering some kind of persecution for their faith. During the rule of the Roman Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century, Roman authorities began to persecute Christians.

Domitian considered himself a God, and had people call him "Lord". During Jesus' time the emperor didn't expect his people to worship him, though he did call himself names like "Son of God" and "Savior".

Revelation is written about 60 years after Jesus' death, and by that time, especially under Emperor Domitian, people were required to worship the emperor as if he were a god.

We don't know if that policy was enforced even in places like modern day Turkey, which is where the readers of the book of Revelation lived. But when you read this book it's pretty clear that these folks see themselves in complete opposition to the Emperor and the empire itself.

Not only that, but the author realizes that these Christians are starting to wonder if it's worth it to remain Christian if it's going to mean they have to suffer for it. So he wants to write in a way that reassures them of the hope they have. He wants to make sure they hang on and don't give up the faith.

While other parts of this book describe the emperor and the empire as a beast or a prostitute who are defeated or discredited, this section contains a heavenly vision that John has of what the world will be like when the Romans are finally punished by God.

This vision is not of Christians flying into the air and going to this place in heaven with pearly gates and streets of gold. People who talk about heaven that way are misreading this book.

In John's vision of the perfect world the heaven and the earth we now know are done away with. There is now a new heaven and a new earth. We don't know what they're like, but John does say that a new Jerusalem, which was the holy city for Jews, comes out of the sky and lands on the earth.

That's right. In Revelation people don't go up to heaven; heaven comes down to earth. This new Jerusalem has the gates of pearl and lots of gold. The imagery he's using comes from OT prophets who talked about the rebuilding of the temple.

Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, but John is now talking about a new Jerusalem that will never be destroyed. It won't be destroyed because God gets rid of all the sinful people in John's vision.

Unlike what many of us have heard, John's vision of the new Jerusalem is not just for all the people who didn't get sent to hell. In this vision some people get sent to the lake of fire, some people live in the new Jerusalem, and still others live outside of it. So it's not a scenario where you either go to heaven or hell in this section of Revelation.

This new Jerusalem is not only a reward for people who stay faithful, but it also cleanses and heals the people who live both inside and outside of it. In the passage we read this morning, an angel shows John a river which flows from God's throne.

This river is not like the Fox River. It is clean and pure and is a source of life. If people want to enter the new Jerusalem from outside, they have to wash their robes in the river, which is a symbolic way of saying they need to cleanse themselves of sin.

Everyone is welcome to this river. You don't have to pay for the water. And best of all, it doesn't have any radium in it, which would require you to beg the people of Milwaukee to let you use their water.

John also sees a tree of life which he says is on both sides of the river. I'm having a hard time envisioning a tree on both sides of a river. I've actually seen a tree that is on both sides of a road. **Slide.** This is the Chandelier Tree in California. I've actually driven my car through this tree trunk.

But I don't think John had a big Redwood in mind here. I think there are probably a number of trees on both sides of the river, and he's speaking of one tree as symbolizing them. Whatever they are, they're very productive trees.

These trees bear fruit twelve months a year, and different fruit each month. Try doing that in your garden at home, right? The number twelve symbolizes Israel itself, so this tree is part of a vision of the perfect land of Israel.

Again, anyone is welcome to the fruit of these trees if they wash their robes before entering the city. The leaves of the trees have medicinal value. They are grown for the healing of the people outside the city.

The last thing he mentions in this passage is God's presence with the people. Until that time they had envisioned God seated on a giant throne in heaven looking down on his subjects.

But John envisions God's throne right there in the new Jerusalem. People have complete access to God. In fact they don't need lights in that town because God's glory lights the whole place up.

Everyone who lives in that town has God's name on their foreheads as a way of showing that God has saved them from all of the awful suffering they went through under Emperor Domitian.

As you think about this vision that John writes about in Rev. 21-22, I want you to consider just how different these images are from the kinds of images many of us were brought up with, in terms of heaven and hell and the afterlife.

When I was younger I was taught that when you die, you were going to either one of two places. If at the time you die, you are currently living a faithful Christian life, and the definition of what that was always seemed hard to pin down, then your soul would go straight to heaven.

I have to tell that I spent my teenage years, and to some extent my college years terrified that something would happen to me and I wouldn't measure up. Maybe I had developed some dreadful habit and now I couldn't be considered to be living the Christian life.

So while people kept insisting to me that God was good and fair and just, the God I knew was ready to discount everything good I had done in my life if at the end I was kinda

screwing things up a little. Especially if I was knocked unconscious before my death and didn't have the opportunity to ask God's forgiveness for the bad things I had recently done.

Now if you read some places in the New Testament, you get that idea. Jesus tells the thief on the cross who acknowledges Jesus' innocence, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

But I think it would be a stretch to say that moments before his execution he suddenly began living a Christian life. So maybe Jesus said he would go right to paradise or heaven right away because of what he believed.

In Matthew 25 Jesus divides the sheep from the goats and sends the sheep to heaven and the goats to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. But in that passage it doesn't even matter what you believe. It only matters that you helped Jesus' disciples when they were mistreated as they tried to spread his message.

So it's hard to completely reconcile those two passages. Is it what you believe or what you do? And do you go right to heaven or right to hell? It doesn't sound like there's any in between in those passages.

Same thing for Rv. 20, where everyone living and dead is made to stand before God. Those whose names were found in the book of life got to live in the new Jerusalem, and those whose names weren't in the book were thrown into the lake of fire.

So it sounds like there's either one or the other. You go to heaven or hell when you die. But Rev. 22 gives us a different image. Some really bad people go to the lake of fire and those who stay faithful to Jesus get to live with God in the new Jerusalem.

But there are still others who live somewhere else, and they are still welcome to approach God. There really isn't anything keeping them out of the city because the gates are always open.

That's a drastically different image from the one we have in chapter 20. One question we need to think about is why we're so quick to latch onto the image where people are summarily sent to heaven or hell, and not to the image where most people are not in either one of those places?

They're both in the Bible. If we insist that one is literally true, don't we have to insist that the other is literally true? But they can't both be literally true. One has some people left over and one doesn't.

I think the only way to reconcile these images is to resign ourselves to the fact that neither one of these are meant to be newspaper account of the afterlife. The Bible does not simply

and clearly tell us about heaven and hell and the end of the world. Anyone who tells you so is more serious about their own viewpoint than they are about the Bible itself.

The Bible tells us about eternal life and God's judgment using a variety of images, all of which are true in their own way, but no single one of them is the truth in its entirety. It's hard for us to accept this because if so much is on the line, things like our eternal destiny, then we want specifics.

We want the Bible to tell us exactly what will happen. If we're dealing with something so terribly profound like where we're going to go forever when we die, then how can God not spell it out for us? How can God expect us to respond if we don't know the whole story?

Can you see the problems you end up with if you read Revelation that way? Another problem is that this way of reading Revelation feeds into this sense, some of which we do find in the Bible, that there is a group of people on earth that God is happy with, and that God is angry enough with everyone else to send them straight to hell when they die.

So if you consider yourself in the first group, and you read books like Revelation, you get the idea that everyone else is against you. It's you and God against the world, and all you can do is try to protect yourself against them.

This image in Revelation 22 flies in the face of that either/or mentality. It makes it sound as though the church should not try to keep anyone out, that we don't need to be afraid of people who we don't consider to be in our group.

Our role is not to delineate clearly who God's happy with and who God's angry with. It's really God's job to make that clear to people. But we are to be a source of healing for the world. We are supposed to be like the leaves on that tree.

We Christians, to the extent that we are able, should work to be like that living water, offered freely to anyone who will come. We should be a place where people can feel cleansed of all the bad stuff they get into all week. We should be a community that enables people through God's power to live more purely.

And most of all, when people come through our gates we want to be the kind of place where people feel God's presence and light in an unmistakable way.

We want to act in such a way that when a visitor comes here on Sunday morning, even if they don't like the style of worship we use or maybe even if they expected something else, they'll at least go away saying, "Well I know God is present in that community."

I want to conclude with some words from the renowned preacher James Forbes, who said some profound words about what it means to be a person who works like these leaves for the healing of the nations.

He said, “To be a healing leaf is first of all to be conscientious about our own health. That is to say, if I am a healing leaf, it means that I am going to take care of my health, holistically understood: body, mind, spirit, emotions, relationships, vocation, community involvement and even environmental responsibility.

But to be a leaf, it’s not only to care for my health, it is to be open to the Spirit to lead me or you in finding some situation in which our immune systems, which helps to heal us, also has an extra measure of healing, so that we can offer that healing to somebody else beyond ourselves.

Now to speak of your being a healing leaf, I really suggest to you that there’s so many ways that this can happen. Of course, we’re still grateful for doctors and the pharmacists and the health care providers, but we can become leaves of healing in the following ways: a greeting card, a smile, a word of cheer, maybe a poem, possibly a song that we sing, or maybe an act of care, a bowl of soup, even a hand placed upon a friend.

And sometimes even shedding a tear along with a friend actually releases the healing powers in that person. And you and I in such action become God’s expression of care for the health and wholeness of our brothers and sisters.”

God has built into each of us the capacity to heal ourselves. And in addition to that has given us energy so that we can help heal somebody else. It is an exciting notion. Also, be open. When you get up, keep your ears open, your heart and your mind. Maybe there is somebody who needs that touch from you or a smile or a greeting. Maybe somebody needs you to walk with them, to hear their concerns, to deal with their burdens as best they can.

You know, we’re talking these days a lot about health care, but when all of us begin to be aware that we are healing leaves, I almost believe that a trillion dollars worth of healing power could be released into our world.

I’ve seen it happen before and I am determined myself to see if I can be a leaf, like a leaf with two sides, to receive carbon dioxide and then to work through the process of photosynthesis so that it becomes a source of healing in our world.

My fellow healers, be a leaf today and God will nourish you and our world will experience a new age of health and wholeness. God bless you, my fellow leaves!