

## *New Creation beyond Resistance*

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Sermon by Grant Miller

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*21:10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.*

*21:22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

*23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

*22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

Our scripture today comes near the end of Revelation. A lot has happened so far. Written to seven churches in what is now Turkey, this letter is an apocalyptic vision of great proportions. There are been beasts and armies, horsemen and plagues. And the whole question is who will win this struggle. Will it be God or Rome? Babylon or the Lamb that was slain?

Biblical scholars have increasingly studied the New Testament as resistance literature—looking at the texts as documents written by a marginal messianic Jewish sect to undermine and subvert the power of the Roman Empire. As we know, Empire isn't just about political allegiance. It's about the way you think, what you do, the way you are in the world. And Rome was a powerful empire; it did not tolerate subversion.

So the church of Christ that proclaims “Jesus is Lord,” rather than the emperor, must find some way to fight against the thinking, being, and doing of the Empire. The church cannot come right out and denounce Rome. That would put them in more trouble than they were already in. Instead, they tell their story—God's story—in a way that critiques Empire rule, encourages the faithful,

and reminds those who have ears to hear where true victory lies. This is the resistance of the church, thwarting the intention of Empire.

Perhaps no where is this type of literature more obvious than in Revelation where there is a cosmic battle going on between the Beast and the Lamb. And the imagery is not subtle. The temple in Jerusalem had just been destroyed, probably not more than 10 or 15 years before the letter was written. This act of Roman rule is a reminder of the Babylonian destruction of the temple, creating an immediate association between Babylon and Rome. They are the same beast by different names.

The church too is under duress, at least the churches addressed in this letter. John mentions as such, recognizing the martyr Antipas in 2:13 and those “being slaughtered for the word of God and the testimony they had given.” (6:9) John himself has been exiled on the island of Patmos. These experiences prompt John to commend the churches on their resistance, characterized by patient endurance, standing firm in their convictions and testimony.

The book of Revelation is setup between the Roman empire and the coming Kingdom of God. Two foes locked in battle. Each making an authoritative claim over the other. Seeking to answer the question of who can stand against the power of Rome.

Then we have our text today which comes after this mighty conflict. There have been miraculous signs. Visions of heaven. Enormous battles without a drop of blood shed. And now a new city coming from heaven. This is what the victory of God over Rome looks like, the slain Lamb triumphing over the brutal empire. This new city contrasts the oppression of empire in four ways. Embedded in the imagery and language of the psalmist and Hebrew prophets, this new city exposes the distortion of empire and reveals the true reign of Christ.

And in the spirit, he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

As I said, the temple in Jerusalem had just been destroyed by the Romans. In the midst of the first great Jewish revolt, the destruction of the temple was a visceral reminder of the Babylonian captivity. And set in motion the following revolts, culminating with Simon Bar Kokhba and the third and final great revolt in 132CE. These revolts exacted a massive toll. Hundreds of thousands of Jews died from the killing, disease, and starvation of war. Many were exiled into slavery. Judea was extensively depopulated of its Jewish communities over this period. Although they may not have been immediately a part of this disaster, the churches receiving the Revelation of John understood the significance. What is the city of God without its temple? How can one worship God without the place that God resides? Rome would say the same thing. That’s the point. Jerusalem is not the city of God; it is Rome with its mighty temples to Jupiter and Mars, with the palace of the emperor-god. And it always will be Rome.

But this vision begins with something different. In the new city is not a Roman temple. It is not a new temple. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb is the temple. The place where one can worship God cannot be destroyed or held off limits, because the temple is God. Unlike that first

ancient temple in Babel that was built up to try and reach God, marking the failure of empiric endeavors, this temple comes down from heaven. In the new city the temple is the Lord and the Lamb.

And the city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

In the new city, there will be no need for the sun and moon. This may seem a little strange to us. We love the sun and the moon. They are a part of God's good creation. Having no need for them may seem like loss for us. But in Roman cosmology the sun and moon are deities. They are Roman gods that give light. There are whole systems of worship and cultic practice that revolve around the celestial beings. And why not? It's very clear that light comes from the sun. Roman claims about the sun seem undeniable. How can we live without the sun? This logic adds legitimacy to the deification of the emperor, the sun god.

In the new city, the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb. The sun and moon no longer reign; their divine power is absent. But nor are they destroyed or conquered. Rather they remain, returned to their proper place in the created order. They are not enemies to be vanquished but witnesses to the glory of God.

And the light of the city that comes from God is not domineering; it guides; it invites. The nations will walk by its light and will bring their glory into it. They too, are neither vanquished, destroyed or conquered like Rome would have it. Rather they can enter the city whose gates are never shut, always open to those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. The new city can be a place for all peoples. Because the light of the city comes from the Lord and from the Lamb.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Empire holds a monopoly on life. It deals death and grants clemency. Life is a privileged commodity in the empire. The repression of Roman occupation was a constant reminder of this. And if anyone forgot, crucifixion was a brutal reminder. With the great Jewish rebellions, Rome took the opportunity to show just to what extent it ruled life itself. The conquered peoples of Rome would not forget that the emperor held power over their life and death.

But in the new city the river of life that flows through the middle of the city, accessible for all. Echoing the psalmist and prophets, this living water is the same that flowed from the garden at the beginning, bringing together original creation with the new thing that God has done. This water births the tree of life which produces plentiful fruit. Its leaves are for the healing of the nations. The source of life in the new city is not wielded to dominate and subdue but bring

healing. Healing to those same nations that have been destroyed and impressed into service by the empire. Healing for the same nations that have been led to the city by the light of the city. This is the life that is available to all and heals the deepest and widest of wounds. This life is of Lord and of the Lamb.

Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

The empire is omnipresent. In the architecture, in the money, in the occupation. The empire is always there. Within the history of ancient Israel, the empire is always there. First Egypt, then Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, now Rome. The names change but the presence is persistent. It makes a claim on us. This is the mark of Beast spoken of in chapter 9. It seeks to imprint its very DNA. In the new city, God is omnipresent. God is in the city. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. This is not just another name on the forehead, substituting the mark of empire. Because the face of the Lord will be visible, not some emperor secluded in Rome. The name of God on the forehead marks the relationship with the God who is in the new city. His servants will worship not an image but the very presence of God. And they will reign forever and ever. The people share in the reign of God just as they experience the presence of God. Servants that not only worship but reign. Because the new city will be filled with the Lord and with the Lamb.

The vision of this new city challenges Rome. It provides the eschatological hope for the churches in Turkey and for us now to resist the wiles of empire. But this vision does more than that.

You see empire is so good at defining the conversation, outlining the terms of debates. Even those who don't like empire, who seek to oppose it, can just as easily get caught up resisting it. Empire begs for resistance. It eats resistance for breakfast. There is no greater example of this than the destruction of the temple and the three great revolts. Perhaps no conquered people resisted Rome more than the Jews. For all their zealous fervor, the temple was destroyed. Three bloody revolts resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the land in ruins, and the people scattered. Resistance often plays by the rules that empire makes. It seeks to oppose what is already present. With no other objective than opposition, resistance becomes bondage again.

But this vision moves beyond Rome's parameters. It isn't just about opposition, the new city leaves empire behind. Because beyond resistance there is freedom. The new city does not have a destroyed temple or a new temple. Its temple is the Lord and the Lamb. The light of the new city does not come from the sun or the moon nor does it reject the heavens; rather the light comes from the Lord and the Lamb. Life in the new city does not come through the triumph of the nations but from the river that flows from the Lord and the Lamb, producing fruit and the very healing the nations. The citizens of the new city do not just give their allegiance to God over Caesar, they worship the God in their midst and reign with the Lord and the Lamb. Freedom is found in the Lord and the Lamb. No longer constrained to the world that empire seeks to construct. The new city is not the anthesis of Rome but greater than Rome. More than Empire

could ever hope to be. This is liberation that exceeds what appears to be the present reality. The Lord and the Lamb are freedom beyond resistance.

The empires of our time act the same as Rome. Take your pick: American nationalism, political ideologies, consumerism, the cult of security. There are also others that are hid from our eyes, often appealing and nonthreatening. We pray that the Spirit may open our eyes to those. Yet the claims of empire that we do see. That ones we can name as distorted or evil. These realities which we oppose so often set the terms of our opposition, they limit our imagination. Our relation to empire becomes bound to the empire itself, even if our posture is seeking to resist it.

But this is not our birthright. Because the new city is coming down. We have been freed from the bondage of empire, so that we can begin to live like this the new city is already here, experiencing new life with new light. With the Lord and the Lamb, we can imagine beyond the confines of empire. Beyond the constrictions of the troubles we see. We have been gifted with the knowledge and foresight of a new city that does not simply oppose but moves beyond the limited vision of empire.

Resistance to the empire may be a side effect of the new city, a byproduct, but it is not the primary purpose

If empire is about power, domination, and self-glory. The Lord and the Lamb are about the reconciliation of all things, the dividing wall being brought down through the power of the Spirit, the same which rose Jesus from the dead.

The scope of empire is limited in comparison to the Lord and to the Lamb. Its goals can't compare with what the Triune creator has done, is doing, and will do. The temple, the light, the life, and the presence of God shatters the categories of empire. They look different, feel different, ask different questions and have different purposes. This liberates from the gaze of empire and all that comes with it. Learning to see and live the freedom of the new city may be difficult and it may take time. However, this coming city cannot be stopped. For it comes from the Triune God, assuring us of release from the bondage of our resistance.

Our freedom is in the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb who was slain.