

Garden to city: <http://www.vimeo.com/7225205>

PPWe begin in a garden, we end in a city—where we, and all creation, are redeemed, liberated, and made new. God is in the house, please stand to honor him as he speaks his word to you... ¹*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.* ²*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* ³*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.* ⁴*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* Revelation 21:1–4 We begin in a garden, we end in a city—where we, and all creation, are redeemed, liberated, and made new.

PPBut there's something else about this new city, this new city, the new Jerusalem declares something that is so important to those who first read the book of Revelation. It tells the people: God wins. Come with me to the first century when John receives the vision of the book of Revelation. We read in the early chapters of Revelation of the suffering and the struggle and the pain that the church is going through. People being put in prison, being persecuted, and even being put to death for their faith. In the midst of the suffering they wonder who really is in charge, who really rules, who really rains, and who really is going to win. The book of Revelation, more than anything else, is a book that declares God rules, God reigns, God wins. When you get the last chapters of the book of Revelation what we get to see is a picture of what it looks like when God wins.

PPAs it turns out, this the kind of place that not only the first readers of Revelation were longing for but it is the kind of place we all long for. In your imagination try to get a picture of this new place: creation, which we often marvel at already, has finally been released to pulsate with the beauty and wonder that God has intended for it from the very beginning. People live in harmony with one another—no more fights, no more wars, no more beating plows into swords, no more arguments between Japan and China, the Palestinians and Israel and Iran, instead people live in harmony with one another, nations live in harmony with one another and people live in harmony with nature and the animals. Every scar of sin is erased from the world. Every piece of brokenness, every trace of death, is gone we live in a gloriously rejuvenated world: no weeds, thorns, thistles, etc. the sea, as we know it is no more. Now some of us may say what you mean there is no sea, I love the water, all the fish that inhabit the sea and all the wonders of the sea. But here is what John is saying in the book of Revelation: the sea with its roaring, raging, agitated waters is a symbol of the nations of the world in their conflict and unrest. The sea is a place of fear is the place of unrest, it is the place to be avoided. So when there is no longer any sea it tells us that all of the unrest, all of the conflict, all of the raging, of this world is done away with. And finally at the center of it all, at the center of this new world, this new Jerusalem where God wins we discover that God now dwells with his people. Where before we saw dimly, where before we had those moments in our lives and sometimes long periods in our lives when we wondered: "is God real, is he powerful, does he reign, does he rule", now we see him face-to-face. **PP**As one testimony of faith puts it, **With the whole creation we wait for the purifying fire of judgment. For then we will see the Lord face to face. He will heal our hurts, end our wars, and set the crooked straight. Then we will join in the new song to the Lamb without blemish who made us a kingdom and priests. God will be all in all, righteousness and peace will flourish, everything will be made new, and everyone will see at last that our world belongs to God!**

PPThe picture of what it looks like when God wins. A little bit more about this new Jerusalem, this city of God. The new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven and settles on the

earth. In other words, this city where we live, redeemed, liberated, and made new is not a city in the clouds it is a city on the renewed earth. Or putting it another way heaven is not the end of the world. Sometimes people believe that what God is going to do is destroy this earth, is going to burn it up and be done with it and we will all leave and we will go to heaven when Christ returns. They get this idea in part from the book of 2 Peter 3.10, *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.* At first blush those words certainly sounds like the earth is going to be destroyed and by extension that we will have to go to heaven to be with God. However, if you take a close look at that chapter in second Peter what you discover is the same kind of language is used to speak about the way that God destroyed the earth with the flood during Noah's day. The destruction then is actually the purifying of the earth not a getting rid of the earth. This is hugely important. For if we proclaim that God wins, but say that in order to win he has to destroy his good creation, then he really hasn't won—but God doesn't destroy his good creation, instead he does for his creation what he does for his people: he redeems it, he renews it, and he liberates it. Just as God takes the church and makes her into the radiant, holy, and beautiful bride of Christ so he takes his creation, that is groaning under the weight of sin according to Romans eight, and turns it into a beautiful, radiant, liberated creation. In doing so, he declares that evil will not have the upper hand, that evil will not win, but that he wins in all things.

There is another important piece of this. A piece that goes back all the way to the time in the Garden. We began in a garden. In that garden God gave a task to humankind. We read in **PP**Genesis 1.27–28, *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea in the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.* **PP** From the very beginning for human beings to carry out their destiny they needed a land. People were designed, if you will, to carry out God's mandate to be co-creators with God. People who would unearth the riches, the wonders, the goodness that was hidden in God's creation for the good of human beings and for the good of all of God's creation. Our task, our life, our purpose is intimately tied up with the earth. The Israelites knew this. For them to be the people that God told them to be they need is a land. God worked long and hard, rescued them from the land of Egypt, to bring them into a land where they could not only worship in the narrow sense, but worship him in how they treated one another in that land, and how they treated the land, and if you look in the book of Deuteronomy even how they treated the creatures, the animals in that land. The people of Israel needed to land in order to be the people God called them to be. In Matthew chapter 5 Jesus tells us that the meek will inherit the earth. The need to have a land in which to carry out God's work remains throughout the ages.

PPThe final and great city of God, the new Jerusalem is a landed place. While we do not know exactly what is going to mean for us to be connected to the land so that we can properly serve God, we do know that in this place we are told that we will worship God, and that we will reign with God. David Lawrence in his book *Heaven: it's not the end of the world* writes, **It may well be that, like Adam and Eve, we are commissioned to steward and develop the new earth. A new world of resources to discover and harness. New vistas of beauty to capture in paintings, poetry and song. Every new discovery the occasion of a great outburst of praise and worship to the one who revealed it and created it. This kind of new Earth is exciting and far from traditional views of "heaven" that have led many Christians to wonder whether they will enjoy eternity when the first flush of relief at getting there has past!**

PPThe final and great city of God—the new Jerusalem is a landed place. It is also a place of phenomenal beauty. If you go and read Revelation 21.9–21 you discover a city that is so beautiful that goes beyond our imagination—where do you get pearls that are large enough to make gates, diamonds for walls, gold that you can see through. The place is of such great beauty that John struggles with imagery that allows us to see just a bit of its wonder. But there is another reason for its beauty. Here’s what it says in Revelation 21.24–26, *The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.* In the Old Testament book of Isaiah chapter 60 we hear a similar message. The great accomplishments, the great works of art, the great economic accomplishments of the nations will be brought into the new city to be enjoyed by God’s people and to enhance its beauty. Back to David Lawrence for a moment. Lawrence writes, **Will all that has been achieved in centuries of human achievement be lost in the fire of judgment? Will God wipe out all progress in science, technology, and the arts, or could it be that this very progress will itself be redeemed and granted a place in the new Earth? ...it is a very narrow view of God’s involvement in his world which maintains that all he is interested in is the salvation of our souls.... God is the God of all creation. ...The earth was not just a disposable space station on which God could work his salvation mission, but it was—and still is—his creation and at every step of its development he has been sustaining it. I am sure that many great works of art, architecture and music, along with scientific discoveries and technological advances have delighted God. As Abraham Kuyper wrote, “... we may conclude that the knowledge and dominion we have gained over nature here can and will be of significance, even in the kingdom of glory.”**

PPThe final and great city of God—the new Jerusalem. A place of beauty, of service, of joy, a place where there’s no more death, or mourning, or pain for the old order of things has passed away. A place where God dwells with his people, where we see him face-to-face. It is a wonderful thing to look forward to and we do, but it is more than something we look forward to. The New Jerusalem teaches us how to live in the city today. The New Jerusalem gives us a hint of how to give people a win today. Think about it like this: at the beginning of each season, the head basketball coach of a large, well-known US University calls his team together for the first meeting of the year. As the rookies enter the room they expect chalkboards, diagrams, depth charts, and scouting reports. Immediately they know something is amiss. They walk into a room with tables graced with fine linen and beautiful bone china and an array of silverware in crystal glasses. The players are invited to have a seat at one of the tables and a meticulously dressed woman teaches them how to place a napkin on their lap, how to ask for salt, as well as the purpose of the multiple pieces of silverware and crystal. Then the players practice what they’ve learned over a well-prepared meal. At the end of the meal the coach explains why he wants a player to learn their table manners: “After a team wins the Division I national championship, they are invited to the White House for dinner with the president. And I want you to be sure you know what to do when you get there.” Preparing for where one is going. As we look at the New Jerusalem in the fullness of what it is we need to start living that life now. Central to living that life is realizing that our work as Christians is to realize that our mission is not only to see sin defeated in people’s lives, but to work to see sin defeated in societies, art forms, and cultural expression.

PP That is the huge task. Most likely for most of us here it’s an overwhelming task we struggle with the mission of seeing sin defeated peoples lives, to go beyond that to see sin defeated in societies, arts, cultural expression feels far above our pay grade. While it feels far above our pay grade, too great a task for us to take on the reality is that if we are going to give

our community the shape of the new Jerusalem really all we need to do is to pay enough attention to where we live, to what's going on where we live that we can answer the question what one thing needs to be done to my neighborhood my community my city looks a bit more like the new Jerusalem. What art could be displayed in my community to bring the flavor of the beauty of the New Jerusalem? What support group could be begun that would help people with their mourning, cry, and pain? What one thing, or one person could be served well by a team from Evergreen going to their home on love your neighbor day? What part, what stretch of road, could use a cleanup crew to take away some of the scars and the brokenness that seems so evident there? There is no doubt that the task is massive when we think of seeing sin defeated in societies, art forms and cultural expressions—but if we are willing to whittle it down to having eyes opened and asking the question what one thing can be done in my community to give it a taste of Jerusalem and then we can make a case by case, and year by year. And those pieces can have a far greater impact and we might imagine.

PPA bunch of high school kids in South Dakota were watching as their surrounding area was slowly dying. When folks went away to college they didn't come back because there was nothing there for them. No jobs, no real places to shop, nothing happening as far as night life went, but these high school students wanted their town to survive not only did they want it to survive, they wanted thrive. But what can a few high school students do? Here's what they did: they opened their eyes to what was going on in their community the is will. They discovered that many people in their area were driving 60 miles to go the big box stores, to get a better deal. The drive to those box stores and people spending their money there was destroying the local stores, the local economy. The students did their research and then they called to gather the community. It was a small enough community that everybody knew that if your high school students did something you'd better show up for the meeting. A large part of the community was there. The students had a significantly simple proposal. They said to everybody gathered there if we would just spend 10% more in our own community it would bring 7 million dollars into their county, Miner County. That spending would give the local economy an important boost. A year later, South Dakota's Department of revenue released an astonishing number: the amount of money spent in minor County have increased by \$15.6 million, more than twice the increased the kids had expected. Not only did that give the economy a needed boost, but increased the tax base to such an extent that many other dreams and hopes and visions were able to be followed.

PPThe task can seem overwhelming, but if we are willing to open our eyes and say: "what one thing, what one thing would help my community and my street in my neighborhood look a little bit more like the New Jerusalem?"

PPWe began in a garden, we will end in a city. The great and final city of God: the New Jerusalem—where we, and all creation, will be redeemed, liberated, and made new. We look forward with great anticipation to God's great city. But as our eyes look forward we also keep them focused on the neighborhoods, streets, and cities we are part of now for we are not satisfied with just looking forward to God's great city, we want to give our world, our cities, our neighborhoods and the people in them a taste of God's city now. We want them to have a taste of God's win, God's victory today.