

International Mission in the City

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you for your welcome this evening. It's really good to be with you and to worship the Lord together with you. I want just for a few minutes to turn back to the passage that we read to Revelation chapter 21. What kind of society do we want? That's been a theme of the referendum last week and the campaign leading up to that. Both sides were trying to present their own vision of or for Scottish society. Now the Bible is profoundly interested in society and in hope for society. In fact, hope is a major theme of the whole Bible. In some parts of the Bible, for example, 1 Peter, it doesn't speak so much about the faith as about the hope that we have in Christ. And this hope that the Bible speaks of is one that doesn't end with this life. I'm a, as I'm sure you can tell, a middle-aged guy and life seems to be galloping by. There's no pause button. And if this life is all there is, then hope amounts to next weekend or my next holiday or a bit further forward retirement.

But then you keep pushing forward and asking, well, then what? Then what happens after that? And ultimately it's decay, old age, death. And that's a grim prospect. It's a prospect of despair. But the Gospel is a message of hope. Hope for this life, but also beyond this life. It holds out the promise of eternal life, of resurrection from the dead, of life on a renewed earth restored to the original perfection that God made, the original harmony that God made. And it's a hope that is for us as individuals, but also for society. And I want to reflect on that hope for society as it's presented in Revelation 21. Because time is limited, I just want to focus really on the last few verses, verses 24 to 27.

The first just a word or two about the context of this. At the beginning of the chapter, John speaks of this vision he sees of a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Now this new heaven and new earth is not in the sense of brand new, but more in the sense of renewed. I've got an old rather battered car. And I could if I had a sudden injection of cash go and trade it in and buy a brand new model.

So that's not really so much the picture here. It's more like taking an old broken down battered car to a garage, to a restorer who will restore it to as good as perhaps even better than it was when it was new. That's the kind of image that there is here. It's a renewed heaven and a renewed earth that is being spoken about. It's parallel with the hope that we have in the scriptures of the resurrection of the body. And of course we have a great prototype of that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus died and his body was placed in a tomb. And then when he rose again, the tomb was empty.

It was the same body. It wasn't some totally new and connected body. It was the same body that rose again that had died and been buried in the tomb. And even to the extent that he showed his disciples that the marks on his hands and in his side where he was wounded in his crucifixion. Jesus spoke about the renewal of all things. Peter in Acts chapter three speaks about the time coming when God will restore everything as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. So there's this renewal of all things that is promised.

[4 : 2 2] There is this great hope that is promised in the scriptures. And it's very much a physical reality. In verse two John says that the writer of this book of Revelation says, I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And this holy city or alternatively a bride dressed for her husband represents the people of God, people of God in all ages. Now of course there's much symbolism in the passage. You can't just take it all literally. It's symbolic language. It's meant to be symbolic. But we have this holy city, this new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

And then in verse nine and following on from that, we have really the development of that vision of that sight of this holy city. And it's a dazzling, glorious, beautiful city.

It's also a massive city. It gives it the dimensions and it's absolutely massive, bigger by far than any mega city in our world today. But I want to jump down to the last few verses of the passage and in verse 24 we read that the nations will walk by its light. The word nations here is the Greek word *ethne* and that's our English word *ethnic* comes from that. So it's not nations in the sort of sense of the modern nation state so much as ethnic groups. So for example, you might have one country say Afghanistan that is one nation, but there are many different ethnic groups within that nation and that's really what's being talked about here. And it speaks about the many, many different nations, many different ethnic groups in this city. They are there in this holy city which represents the people of God. In fact, in the next chapter, chapter 22, it speaks about the healing of the nations, the healing of the ethnic groups. And I'm going to tell that they will walk by, sorry, that the nations will walk by its light. So they will walk by that that's the light of God and the light of the Lamb and the Lamb here is Jesus Christ. So God and Jesus Christ are the source of light in this city. And what that means is that these nations, they live in joyful obedience following the ways of God, the ways of Jesus Christ. God and Jesus Christ are the source and center of life in this city. And then we read that the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. And in verse 26, the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. And what that's speaking about is that the cultural heritage of all the different peoples of the world, it won't be destroyed, it will be redeemed, it will be purified of all that is evil, all that is idolatrous. But all of those cultures, all the heritage of those vast array of cultures that we find in the world today will be directed to the glory of God and the glory of Jesus Christ. So this city, this new Jerusalem is a multicultural city. It's a place of great diversity, great cultural diversity. And we have in these verses a very positive view of human cultures. It speaks of the splendor, the glory and honor of the different nations, the different ethnic groups. And we today live in a world of diverse cultures. And some of you will have traveled and had experience of different cultures in different parts of the world, or even you don't have to go far, even within our own city here in Edinburgh. But all that is noble, all that is true, all that is good, all that is praiseworthy of all these different cultures of the world will be there in the new Jerusalem, directed to the praise of God and the praise of Jesus Christ. So this city of the new Jerusalem is not a place of bland cultural uniformity. It's not some kind of globalized cultural meltdown.

[9:02] I'll just use a couple of examples. First of all, in the area of food, which is one of my interests, there are certain, I won't mention the names, but you all know what I mean, certain brands of kind of food outlet, which you can go to it in Edinburgh, New York, Karachi, anywhere pretty well. And it's pretty much the same wherever you go. And that's not the kind of image that we have in the city. Rather it's a city with diverse ethnic cuisine. So you can go and get some mutton curry and chapattis. You can go for your Spanish tappas. You can go for your Chinese meal, your Mexican, your Thai, even Haggis, Neeps and Tatties. But it's all there. There's just variety, diversity in this city.

Or in the area of music. Again, you can get sort of watch certain TV shows where you can get music from anywhere around the world and it sounds pretty much the same. And again, that's not what we have here. The New Jerusalem will be more like a world music festival with a rich variety of musical styles. There'll be Indian sitar, African drums, Peruvian pan pipes, Scottish fiddle, all different kinds of Western folk and classical and rock music and just reflecting the vast array of human creativity that we find in our world.

So this city, this vision of the city, it's a place of color and variety and vibrancy. Now of course this is a vision of the future. It's of this perfect city that is to come.

And of course we live in an imperfect world. But there are implications from this for our mission in a multicultural city, in a multicultural world. Now in our society over the last few decades there's been a lot of discussion and debate about multiculturalism on the one hand and the need for integration on the other. And often those two things are kind of placed against each other. Now among the people of God, there has to be integration. There has to be integration for any kind of cohesive church community. And that integration is into recognizing, acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord. Everything has to be brought into submission to Jesus Christ who is the Lord. The thing that we have in common is that He is our Lord. He is our Savior. Without that there's no citizenship of His kingdom, of

His city. Without that God's people would be like a wheel without a hub if you can imagine that. But Jesus' kingdom, Jesus' city allows for almost infinite diversity. In fact we all even see Christ Himself.

We look at Christ from different angles from the particular cultures that we come from. So we should not try to impose a monocultural uniformity on the church but allow a Christ-centered diversity to flourish. And one of the problems with, perhaps the main problem with multiculturalism as it's usually envisioned in our society is that it's a secular vision where God has been banished to the personal and private sphere. And so it's a vision that is really hollow at the center. And in both church and in society we need a multiculturalism that is God-centered and Christ-centered. And that is the reality of the New Jerusalem that we see here.

[12 : 54] Well then we come to verse 27 and there we have really another side, the other side of human cultures and human nature presented. Verse 27 says, nothing impure will ever enter it. And there's much about every nation, every culture, every ethnic group that is impure, shameful, deceitful, evil. And there's no place for these things in this holy city in the New Jerusalem. So there's a need not only for celebration and affirmation of different cultures but also for transformation of different cultures. All cultures must come under the judgment of God and the judgment of the word of God. All cultures need to be purified and changed in the light of the Gospel and through submission to Jesus Christ. And we as God's people need to work for this cultural transformation in the world, in its cultures, including in our own cultures.

And then it comes down to the level of the individual. It says, nothing impure will ever enter it nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful. There is no place for sin in this city. No place for anything that is shameful, deceitful, evil, sinful. Only the pure may live there. It's like if you imagine some kind of green eco-city that's sort of been designed to be, you know, leave no cabin footprints and it's just a really clean eco-city. But then somewhere in the middle, someone plants a massive factory that belches out noxious fumes and, you know, chokes the atmosphere and just pollutes the whole place. It would ruin the place, wouldn't it? Well, that's what sin would do in this holy city in the New Jerusalem. And of course, there's a problem there because all of us are impure. All of us, our lives are polluted by our own sins, by our own revolt against God. And so we need to have our sins taken away. We need to have our sins cleansed. We need to have our sins forgiven.

And the next bit really gives the hint of how that can happen. It's only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life who will enter that city. And what it's saying here is that it's not the population of this city are not people who have achieved self-purification.

They have not cleansed themselves, but they have been cleansed by the Lamb who is Jesus Christ. John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus, announced Jesus coming, or sort of really introduced Jesus by saying, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And the word Lamb really is the language of sacrifice. And in the Bible, in the Old Testament, there's so much about sacrifice that people need sacrifices to approach God, that people need sacrifices in order for their sins to be forgiven. And Jesus Christ is the ultimate sacrifice. He died on a cross in order to take away our sins, to bring us to God, to reconcile us to God, to make us pure, to make us clean. And it's through believing in Him that we gain, that we can gain access to this city and to the hope of eternal life.

[16 : 44] So just around this up, we have here this vision that is given to the apostle John on the island of Patmos. And it's written down for our benefit. It's a sure and certain vision of the future of God's people, of the renewal of all things. But it also gives us something to aim for and work for and pray for in this age, in our communities, in our cities. And yet of course only, it will only be fulfilled and complete in the age to come. And we have here this picture of this glorious future for the people of God, this vision of life that is really life. Amen. May God bless His word to us.