

THE HOLY CITY

Revelation 21; 22

In this closing picture from John's vision the first thing to note in all classes is the fact that our church takes its name from the holy city coming down from God out of heaven. This should be an inspiration and a joy to all of us. After discussing the main features of the vision, the relation between the beginning of the Word and these closing chapters should be pointed out. It is very important that the pupils see the Word as one book, a complete picture of life and its development for good or evil as we choose to be led by the Lord or by self.

Doctrinal Points

The account of the holy city is a vision of the true form of life in which we may find lasting joy and peace.

Our "gate" into the city is through regular study of the Word and the writings, together with consistent efforts to apply the truths to life.

Notes for Parents

Many churches, taking statements in the Bible literally, think that there will someday be a great judgment at the end of the world. In the New Church we regard all the Word as a parable, though much of it is also history, and we believe that there have been several judgments, one on each of the various church eras that have succeeded each other on earth, and also that each one of us is judged when at death he enters the spiritual world; that is, his inner life is revealed and he finds his place in heaven or in hell according to the character which he has formed in himself during his life in this world.

As verse 12 of chapter 20 tells us: "I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another

book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.” The books are the record of our lives which we write into our character day by day, and the book of life is the Word of God. A heavenly character is one patterned on the precepts of the Word.

John’s vision in Revelation is a symbolic picture of this whole process of judgment, beginning with the vision of the Lord and the warnings and promises to the various kinds of people. After that, John saw a throne and the Lord sitting upon it with the book of life in His hand. The book was at first sealed with seven seals. This is a picture of the Word of God as we first read it, without understanding it. Then in the vision the Lord opens the seals one by one and as each is opened, strange and terrible things happen. The more deeply we see into the meaning of the Word the more we realize how many evils are in us, which we must fight and overcome with the Lord’s help. But throughout the vision the good are also revealed and are protected by the Lord, just as He always seeks to preserve whatever good is found in us.

Finally in our chapters for today there comes the beautiful vision of the holy city New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven. It is a vision of the true form of life in which we may find joy and peace. We enter it by studying the Word of God and seeing and accepting its deeper truths and living according to them. The wall of the city is the literal sense of the Word, its foundations are the basic principles of a good life as laid down in the ten commandments. The precious stones are the varied and beautiful truths which appear to us as we study the Word, its gates of pearl the means of entrance through obedience to its teachings, its golden street the path of loving service in which we learn to walk.

The New Church is based on the revelation of the deeper meaning within the letter of the Word. So it takes as its name the “Church of the New Jerusalem.” The way to the holy city has been revealed by the Lord. It is not always an easy way—it is not the way of worldliness and self-satisfaction—but if we choose to undertake it,

the Lord and the angels are ever with us, enlightening, inspiring, and strengthening us. Verse 14 of chapter 22 tells us: Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”

Primary

Tell the children that John was given a vision of the beautiful city which is a picture of heaven, in which we shall all live someday if we are good. Then read from the Word as much of the actual description as possible. Be sure to include and comment upon 21:27 and 22:11, showing the children that it is the life they live here which determines whether or not they will enter the gates of the holy city of heaven. See how many of the details of the vision the children can remember afterward.

After John was given the messages to the seven churches, he was shown many wonderful and terrible things which teach us what happens in the other world to people who refuse to listen to what the Lord teaches us so lovingly and who insist on doing just as they please all their lives. And the vision shows us, too, how the Lord takes care of all who are good, and separates them from the evil.

After that John saw a vision of a sealed book which no one but the Lord could open.

As the seals of the book were opened one by one, a great judgment took place. Finally what did John see coming down from God out of heaven?

How many gates and foundations did this city have?

What can you tell about them?

How was the city measured?

What shape was it?

What did John see flowing from the throne of God?

What grew on either side of the river?

Where have we heard of the river and the tree of life before?

Who cannot enter the city?

I wonder if you remember hearing about a river and about the tree of life in one of our lessons on the book of Genesis. They were in the Garden of Eden. Let us look back in our Bible and read about them. [Read Genesis 2:8-12.] When we are innocent little babies, before we have begun to do naughty things, it is like

living in the Garden of Eden. But if we keep trying to stop being naughty and grow up to be strong, good men and women, when we die we shall live in heaven, and this is what the beautiful city of John's vision pictures.

Junior

After your review begin with the name of our church, and explain the general meaning of the holy city. Then take up such details as are mentioned in the Junior notes, having the class look up all the references to other parts of the Word. End with the lesson of 21:27 and 22:11.

With what vision does the book of Revelation open?

To whom was the revelation given?

Why did the seven churches in Asia need the messages that were given to John for them?

With what words do all the messages end?

The whole book of Revelation is really a picture of what happens in our lives as we begin to understand what the Lord says to us in His Word. Little by little we are led to see the wrong things that are in us, first in our conduct, then in our thoughts, and finally deeper and deeper down in our hearts. This is what is called the process of judgment. And if we acknowledge our faults as they are brought to light and try with the Lord's help to conquer them, we gradually become true children of God. This is what is called regeneration, which means rebirth. It is a long, slow process which goes on all our lives in this world. But if we are faithful, we come at last to the holy city toward which the Lord has all along been leading us.

So at the very end of the book—the end of the Bible itself—John is given a beautiful vision of this holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. Our church is named for this city, because our church is founded on the opened Word. The description of the city in verses 11 to 27 of chapter 21 is very beautiful, and we like to read it over and over. See how many things you can remember about it. In each detail there is a wonderful meaning which you will learn gradually as you come to know

more and more of correspondences.

Then in chapter 22 John is given a vision of what is within the city.

What does he see flowing from the throne of God?

What grows beside the river?

Where did we first read of this river and tree of life?

Read Genesis 2:8-17. And one of the Major Prophets also saw these things. Read Ezekiel 47:1-12.

Water is a picture of truth. The great river symbolizes the truth flowing from God to us in the Word. Everyone who really wants the truth can find it there. Read verse 17. Now read what the Lord said to the woman of Samaria in John 4:10-14. The tree of life which grows beside this river is a picture of the beautiful principle that everything we have comes to us from the Lord, and its fruit is genuine goodness. Read 22:14 to see how we may become truly good.

Now read 22:11. It teaches us that merely passing from this world into the spiritual world does not change anyone. A man who is evil here is just as evil when he wakes up in the world of spirits, and a man who is good here continues to be good there. After death no one can change his heart. We are put in this world just so that we can learn what is right and by choosing freely to do it make it our own forever.

There is one other point which we should notice especially. Read 22:8-9. Some churches teach that angels are a separate kind of creature, quite different from men and women. But here the angel tells John that he had himself been one of the prophets who had obeyed the teachings of the Word.

What does the word *angel* mean?

We are all angels when we are carrying the Lord's messages to others by our words or by our lives, and if we are the Lord's messengers in this way while we live here, we shall in time be beautiful angels in heaven. The holy city is a picture of the life that is built on obedience to the Lord's truth. Read 21:16-17. We know what

we mean when we say that a person is a “square shooter.” The good life is foursquare—equal in its understanding of what is right and in its performance of right—and it has another dimension also which is equal to the other two—its height. That means that it is a life that looks to the Lord as its source and director. That is why the measure of the city is said to be “the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.”

Intermediate

Follow the same general outline as for the Juniors, but do more with the correspondence of the details. Stress the necessity of making our choice now and of looking to the Lord and the Word for our guidance all our lives.

Verse 2 of our first chapter for today is one which New Church members should memorize, because symbolically it gives us the reason for the name of our church. We have seen in the Old Testament and in the Gospels that Jerusalem stands for the church as to doctrine. The New Jerusalem is the New Church as to its doctrine, and every detail in the vision of the holy city refers to that doctrine and its glory and power. Life according to that doctrine makes the church also “the bride, the Lamb’s wife.”

The “great and high mountain” to which John was carried in spirit, we are told by Swedenborg, is the highest heaven. The “wall great and high” is the literal sense of the Word which contains and protects all truth. The twelve gates are all the knowledges of good and truth by which men are introduced into the church. The three gates on each side should not be thought of as three separate entrances, but rather as three gates one within another, representing the opening of all three planes to the Lord.* The foundations of the city are the things of doctrine in the literal sense of the Word, such as the ten commandments. The fact that “the length is as

*Although this is an appealing idea—with logic on its side—the editor is not aware of any direct statement to this effect in the writings. Cf., however, CL 11. One might also note that standard practice in Near Eastern cities—for defensive purposes—was to build walls with gates in depth. —Ed.

large as the breadth” means that in it good and truth are present in equal measure. The precious stones are all the beautiful truths of doctrine, which take different aspects to different minds. The gates all of one pearl picture the fact that all the knowledge about the Lord which we make our own by living it combines to bring us into the New Church. The street of gold is the path of loving service which enables us to see the beauty of truth. Verses 22 and 23 mean that all who are of the New Church in the heavens acknowledge gladly that they have no goodness or truth of their own but that all goodness and truth are of the Lord alone.

This same thought is carried out in the twenty-second chapter in the picture of the great river of water of life with the tree of life on either side. If we look to the Lord as the source of all wisdom and goodness, He enables us to do “good works,” that is, acts which have genuine goodness in them, at every stage of our progress in knowledge of the truth. These are the twelve manner of fruits borne every month. The leaves of the tree, which are for the healing of the nations, are rational truths developed from the principle pictured by the tree of life. We can see that if the thoughts and acts of everyone in the world were constantly governed by obedience to the Lord, all the ills of the world would be speedily healed.

Notice that although the gates of the city are always open, nothing that “defileth” ever enters. This is because only those who really desire the truth for the sake of life ever approach the city. Many in this world learn the truth and talk about it, but if they do not want it to live by, it is only in their external memories, which are closed at death. Only what is lived out is written on the heart. This is what is meant by being written “in the Lamb’s book of life.” Read verse 12 of chapter 20. The other book which was opened is the Word, and men are judged according to the comparison between their lives and the Word. Each of us is writing his book of life day by day. Everything—every thought and feeling—which we choose to make our own becomes a part of our inner life, no matter how different we may seem on the outside, and when we leave this world, we leave the outside behind and appear as we really are

inside. It is a fact that the Lord does not judge us at all: we judge ourselves. This is what the whole book of Revelation teaches us.

The warning in verses 18 and 19 of chapter 22 is a very serious one. As you grow older, you will find that people are constantly tempted to change the Word of God, to try to make it say what they think it ought to say instead of what it actually does say. This soon leads to the belief that the letter of the Word is not to be trusted, that it is the work of men and not of God. Then men begin to delve into the history of the Bible people instead of into the meaning of the Word itself. So they exalt the thoughts of men above the thoughts of God and cut themselves off from the light which the Word is given to bring to them. The fact that we do not always understand clearly what the Word is telling us does not mean that the Word is faulty—it means that we are ignorant and “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken,” as the Lord said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25). It is not an idle warning which is put in this prominent place at the very end of the Bible.

Basic Correspondences

the wall of the holy city	=	the literal sense of the Word
the twelve gates	=	all the introductory knowledges of good and truth
the foundations	=	the basic truths on which a heavenly character is built
precious stones	=	particular truths through which spiritual light shines
the holy city New Jerusalem	=	the true system of doctrine found in the opened Word
the street of gold	=	the path of loving service

Senior

Do more in this class with the outline of the Bible as a whole and the force of these concluding chapters as the culmination of the long spiritual history of mankind and of the individual life. What it means to be a New Churchman is a good general topic for discussion.

The Scriptures open with the Garden of Eden and close with the holy city. The Garden of Eden pictures not only the primitive state of the race man but the infant state of the individual. And the holy city pictures the ultimate goal of humanity and of each one of us. All the Scriptures in between the two describe the journey from what Swedenborg calls the “innocence of ignorance” to the “innocence of wisdom.” The garden pictures the range of opportunities which the Lord sets before each of us; the city, our highest possible attainment.

In both the garden and the city we find the great river and the tree of life, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not found in the holy city. We recall that the tree of life pictures the principle that all good and truth are the Lord’s. This is the delight of the angels in heaven. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is the principle that man of himself is able to know truth and to do good. Those who have chosen this principle to rule their lives are forever outside of the holy city. The choice between these two principles is the fundamental choice which each of us must make while he lives in this world.

The fruit of the tree of life comes to us as nourishment for our souls in every possible state through which we must pass—the fruit yielded every month—and the leaves of the tree, which are for the healing of the nations, picture the thoughts and reasonings which spring from genuine acknowledgment of the Lord and desire to be led by Him alone. We can easily see that if all men were in this acknowledgment and desire, the nations would literally be healed. Injustice, strife, and oppression spring from the leaves of the other tree.

The beautiful picture of the holy city, with its twelve foundations, its walls great and high, its gold and precious stones, its gates of pearl which are never closed, its golden streets, and the Lord Himself its light is a picture of our inner lives in heaven if we are faithful in our effort to make the books of our lives read like the book of life (Revelation 20:21). We should also recognize that the life pictured by the holy city New Jerusalem is life according to the

truths of the opened Word. It is the life of the New Church, the crown of all the churches. That is why our church was in its beginning named the “Church of the New Jerusalem.” Each of us should be proud of this name and should try to live up to it, by studying the Word not only in its letter but in its spiritual sense and making the doctrines revealed for our church our own by learning and living them. This is the challenge which the name presents to us.

If we compare Genesis 2:16-17 with Revelation 22:11-12, we see that the law laid down at the beginning of our lives works out to its inevitable conclusion. The choice is ours. We make our lives good or evil, happy or miserable, by our own choice, and the choice made in this world cannot be reversed after death. The final judgment is merely the opening of our interiors to reveal what we have written there.

Adult

The identification of the holy city with the New Church and what this should mean to us is the especial lesson for the Adult class. We should recognize clearly that a city represents a system of doctrine and that, although we may not all enter the city by the same gate or be delighted with the same precious stone in its foundations, we do not enter it at all unless we see it as a city that is foursquare and compact together and wish to establish our lives within its walls.

Swedenborg tells us (AE 879) that “‘a city’ in the spiritual sense signifies doctrine.” We have seen that our house is the house of our character. We build it within the city of certain doctrines or teachings through which we are associated with other men and women and can help them and be helped by them. Jerusalem is the city of the Lord’s teachings, “the church as to doctrine.” The temple was there, and there the worship of the Lord was carried on. We know that the actual city of Jerusalem was merely a representative and that when the inhabitants had perverted even the externals of their worship, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. So it has been with every church: when most of its adherents became selfish and worldly and no longer carried on

their worship from a desire to serve the Lord and the neighbor, its city of doctrine was broken up and its people dispersed. Yet throughout the Word the Lord promises that in the fullness of time a church will be raised up which shall not perish, a system of truth will be revealed which shall not perish, a system of truth will be revealed which shall be adequate for all time. This is the stone which smote Nebuchadnezzar's image and then grew into a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

It is also pictured as the holy city New Jerusalem which John saw descending from God out of heaven "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Swedenborg (AE 881) beautifully explains this verse. He says that by Jerusalem is meant the church, and continues: "he [John] saw it first as a city, and afterwards as a Virgin Bride; as a city representatively, and as a Virgin Bride spiritually, thus in a twofold idea, one within or above the other; just as the angels do, who when they see or hear or read in the Word of a 'city,' in the idea of the lower thought perceive a city, but in the idea of higher thought perceive the church as to doctrine; and the latter, if they desire it and pray to the Lord, they see as a virgin in beauty and clothing according to the quality of the church. Thus also it has been granted me to see the church . . . The church is no otherwise attired for her betrothal, and afterwards for conjunction or marriage, than by the Word; for this is the only means of conjunction or marriage . . . From these things it may appear, that by 'Jerusalem prepared as a bride for her husband,' is signified that church conjoined with the Lord through the Word." The walls of the city, like the garments of the bride, picture the truths of the Word, which make of the holy Jerusalem "a city that is compact together" (Psalm 122:3). We build our house within the walls of the holy city New Jerusalem when we choose to allow the truths of the Word revealed for the New Age to define, circumscribe, and guard our thought and conduct.

This thought brings us to the consideration of the third of the fundamental doctrines of the New Church, the doctrine of life. Perhaps the most popular and most frequently quoted sentence

ever written by Swedenborg is, “All religion is of the life, and the life of religion is to do good.” (Life 1) This is a beautiful and true statement, but like all statements it can be falsified if it is taken out of the system of truth to which it belongs and used to support and defend ideas contrary to that system—like a single stone taken from the wall of Jerusalem and built into the wall of Babylon. This particular statement has been used sometimes to excuse lack of interest in “doctrine,” and sometimes even to support the position that it is not necessary to go to church, to know about and worship the Lord, or even to keep the commandments, if only one is kind and charitable to his neighbors and active in so-called “good works.” We need to know what Swedenborg means by “the life” and what by “to do good.” “The life” is not outward conduct. Of the Pharisees the Lord said, “Ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones.” (Matthew 23:27) And at another time He said, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53) “The life” is the inmost or heart of man. Religion must be primarily in the heart. And the Lord tells us what it is to do good in Micah 6:8: “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” “Good works” are not measured by the amount of money we give to charity or by our activity in social reforms, but by our personal righteousness, the justice, mercy, and humility before God which we show in every relation of life. “To do good” is to do not what I think is good or what my neighbors think is good but what the Lord says is good, and this involves a thorough and ever-growing knowledge of the Scriptures and their meaning, a constant effort to learn the Lord’s will and do it and to avoid evils as sins against God. If a person’s life lacks this inner quality of humility and obedience to the Lord, he cannot do good, whatever his outward acts may be. “If he does them from God they are good, if from self they are not good.” (DL 9) And the only way to acquire this inner quality is to keep the commandments, to

shun as sins against God the things which the Lord says we must not do. As long as we refuse to recognize our evils, as long as we excuse and defend them, we are not really looking to the Lord for guidance at all, and there is no life in anything we do.

The holy city New Jerusalem is the picture of a heavenly society, the New Church teaching lived. It exists in heaven, but also it is descending to earth to the extent that individual men and women learn and live these teachings. It is “foursquare,” “the length, and the breadth, and the height of it are equal,” and its measurements are those of a man, “that is of the angel.” This is the full life with its three dimensions—love, wisdom, and act—perfectly equal: no good desire which is thwarted by ignorance, no knowledge of the truth which is not put into practice, no deeds which are not the expression of love and wisdom. All the good affections which men may have, represented by the twelve apostles and by the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, are there as means of entrance and supports. The gates are not shut at all; all who wish may enter. And yet it is said, “And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth”: those who do not wish to obey and serve the Lord see no beauty in the city and have no desire to enter it. For its beauties are all representative: the precious stones are beautiful truths seen in variety by different minds and translucent from the spiritual meaning. The golden streets are paths of loving service. The river of water of life is the truth proceeding from the Lord, the same living water which He promised to the woman of Samaria, and the fruits of the tree of life are all form of heavenly use. These things are beautiful only to those who love goodness for its own sake, thus who love the Lord, who is Good. The worship in the city is directed to the Lord alone, and all the light and glory of it are from Him. This is the picture of the crown and reward of a truly good life; and only a truly good life, lived according to the commandments in loving service of the Lord and the neighbor can see its beauty and glory.

We should all recognize in this last book of the Bible a stirring picture of the life of the true New Churchman, beginning with the

beautiful vision of the Lord Jesus Christ reigning, and going on through the lifelong battle against the falsities and evils in oneself as they are gradually uncovered through deeper and deeper understanding of the Word, to the final victory of the established heavenly character with its enjoyments of the Lord's great gifts of love, truth, and heavenly usefulness. "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 897; "Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, as it were a jasper stone, shining like crystal, signifies that in that church the Word will be understood, because translucent from its spiritual sense. . . . By these words is described the understanding of the Word with those who are in the doctrine of the New Jerusalem, and in a life according to it. With these the Word shines as it were when it is read: it shines from the Lord by means of the spiritual sense, because the Lord is the Word, and the spiritual sense is in the light of heaven which proceeds from the Lord as a sun."

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 935: "He who believes that a man does good that is acceptable to the Lord, which is called spiritual good, unless there are truths from the Word in him, is much deceived. Goods without truths are not goods, and truths without goods are not truths with man, although in themselves they may be truths: for good without truth is like the voluntary of man without the understanding, which voluntary is not human, but is like a beast's, or like that of a carved image which an artificer causes to operate. But the voluntary together with the intellectual becomes human according to the state of the understanding by which it exists. For the state of life of every man is such that his will cannot do anything except through the understanding, nor can the understanding think anything except from the will."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What did all the Lord's messages point out to the seven churches?
good and bad points, warning, promise
- J. Why did the church of Laodicea receive the severest condemnation?
hardest problem to overcome
- P. What has been named for this city (Revelation 21:2)? *our church*

- P. How many gates did the city have? *twelve*
- P. What did the angel measure it with? *gold reed*
- J. What was its shape found to be? *foursquare*
- P. What were seen in its foundations? *precious stones*
- P. What were its gates made of? *pearl*
- J. How was it lighted? *the Lord*
- J. Who can enter it? *all who will to*
- J. What was seen proceeding out of the throne of God? *river of water of life*
- P. What grew beside the river? *tree of life*
- P. Where have we heard about the river and the tree of life before? *Eden*
- J. What did the angel tell John when John would have worshiped him?
worship God
- J. How do we regularly use the last verse of the Bible? *benediction*
- I. What does the holy city represent? *true system of doctrine found in
opened Word*
- S. What should the name of our church mean to us? *a challenge to live up to
all it implies*