

The Israel of God  
Revelation 21:9-14  
1/31/2016

There are a lot of Christians out there today who believe that there are two groups of people who are both God's people. There is Israel, and then there is the church. For these people, Israel is often more important. They see the Old Testament people of God as being the more fundamental truth, and then the church is a kind of parenthesis, and when Christ comes back, the church will cease to exist, and it will only be Israel again. This kind of thinking is called dispensationalism. If you have ever read any of the "Left Behind" series of books, you were looking at a version of dispensationalism. It is so called, because they believe that various ages of the world, which they call dispensations, have completely different ways of being saved. They believe that the Old Testament believers were not saved in the same way that New Testament believers are. They tend to think that Old Testament believers are saved by works, whereas New Testament believers are saved by grace. There are many passages in the Bible which can show us that this kind of thinking does not do justice to the New Testament teaching on the church. One could go profitably to Galatians 3, which says that those who are of faith are the children of Abraham. Or Galatians 6, which calls the church "the Israel of God." Or Romans 4, in which Paul tells us that Abraham is the father of the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Paul tells us there that Abraham was saved by grace through faith, just as we are today. Our passage today also helps us understand that there is only ever one people of God. The church is the New Testament Israel, and Israel is the Old Testament church. Let me repeat that: the church is the New Testament Israel, and Israel is the Old Testament church.

In Revelation 21, we are continuing to look at the church, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. So far, we have seen that the end of all time will have a perfect setting, a perfect bride, resulting in a perfectly happy bride, and that we know we are God's children if we know we are adopted as His children. In verse 9, one of the "seven bowl" angels comes to show John something more. Why does John give us this little detail that the angel is one of the angels who poured out the seven bowls? The reason is that this vision is tightly connected with the plagues. The plagues were poured out on

Babylon, the prostitute. As we have seen throughout Revelation, Satan always tries to bamboozle people by creating a counterfeit of what is true. There is a counterfeit trinity, counterfeit revelation, counterfeit miracles, and then there is Babylon, the counterfeit church. The plagues were poured out on the counterfeit church. So now, one of those angels involved in the judging of the counterfeit church has the privilege of pointing out to John the true church.

The angel carries John away to a very high mountain. This is a direct echo of what happened to Ezekiel at the very end of the book. In chapters 40-48 of Ezekiel, an angel takes him to a very high mountain, and shows him a temple. The temple has twelve gates, just as Revelation 21 describes. The names of the twelve tribes are on the gates of Ezekiel's temple, just as they are here in Revelation 21. The book of Ezekiel ends with the comforting statement "The Lord is there," meaning that the Lord is in his temple. It is clear in Revelation 21 that the Lord is there, because the glory of the Lord is present in the temple. Now, Ezekiel 40-48 is not the easiest thing in the world to read, but here are some pointers that might help. It is necessary to understand something about Ezekiel's temple so that we can understand why John describes the new Jerusalem the way he does.

Ezekiel's temple is not a temple that appears on earth. One of the most remarkable things about Ezekiel's temple is that when the people came back from exile, you would have thought that they would have taken Ezekiel's descriptions of the temple, and then make the second temple (the first temple of Solomon was destroyed in 586 B.C. during the invasion from Babylon) after the pattern of what Ezekiel saw. The plain simple fact is that they did not build the second temple after the pattern of what Ezekiel saw. The second temple looked nothing like Ezekiel's temple. And the Lord God was never upset about that fact. There is a very simple reason for this: the temple that Ezekiel saw was indeed a real temple that could be measured and described, but it was not an earthly temple. It was a heavenly temple. All of the measurements and descriptions of Ezekiel's temple are meant to teach God's people how to live while they wait to see that temple. If we could go up into heaven right now, we would see Ezekiel's temple, and we would recognize it from Ezekiel's description.

The amazing thing about Ezekiel's temple is that John saw it coming down out of heaven. It is the bride of Christ. So what does that mean? We

learn from other Scriptures that the people of God are the temple of God. The heavenly temple that Ezekiel and John both saw are so tightly connected with the people of God, that we can say that they are the same thing. Remember that Paul says that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit? And then Peter also says that we are living stones, being built into a spiritual temple. So both John and Ezekiel use this language about temples (which is, of course, language that the people of that would have readily understood) to talk about the people of God. That temple is continually being built until the end of time, and when we see it at last, the finished work, it will be awe-inspiringly, breathtakingly, stunningly beautiful. And why is that?

The reason why the church will be so beautiful is that the church will have nothing less than the glory of God. All through the Bible, the Lord God has said that he will never share His glory with anyone else. No false gods, no humans, nothing in creation is worthy to share the glory of God. However, at the end of time, when the gates of heaven are opened, and the Bride of Heaven comes down to earth, she will be covered with the glory of God. She will be so bright, you could not look at her directly. It is one reason why both Ezekiel and John have difficulty using human language to describe it. How can earthly language do justice to glorious heavenly realities?

Part of the glory of the church is that she is one church. Notice that you do not see multiple brides coming down out of heaven. You do not see a Presbyterian bride, a Baptist bride, a Methodist bride, a Lutheran bride, and an Anglican bride. No, you see one bride, consisting of all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. When we say the Apostles Creed together, and we come to the line “I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” this vision of John is what we should be thinking about when we say it. Lots of people wonder about that word “catholic.” The word “catholic” means “universal.” So we believe in one universal church consisting of all true believers. We certainly do not believe that Lebanon Presbyterian Church is the only true church, or that the Presbyterian Church in America is the only true branch of the visible church. There are true believers in most, if not all denominations. That is the church we are talking about. It is currently invisible. We cannot see into the hearts and minds of anyone else. But when she comes down out of heaven, the invisible church will be gloriously visible!

We started out talking about dispensationalism. Now we come to that

part of the text that addresses the question of whether there are two groups or one group that can call itself the people of God. John says that there is one people of God. We see it in this remarkable fact: the city of God has twelve gates, on each of which is a name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. This represents the Old Testament church, the people of Israel. Just as in Ezekiel's vision, there are three gates on a side, and each gate stands for one of the twelve tribes. Verse 14 tells us, however, that there are also twelve foundations. Each of these foundations has the name of one of the twelve apostles on it. It is a bit difficult, incidentally, to picture in one's mind's eye what this would look like, but probably it means that if you were looking at this city, you would see the foundations alternating with the gates. So, if you were looking at the east side, for instance, you would see a corner-base, a gate, a base, a gate, a base, a gate, and another corner-base. So, probably what John has in mind here is that the gates and the foundations (or bases) alternate. The tribes alternate with the apostles in the ONE city of God. So, the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles together make up the one city of God. Plainly, there are not two peoples of God, but only one. The only way to be part of the people of God today is to be a believer in Jesus Christ. When we do, we become one of those stones that will make up the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the bride of Christ.

A few other things are of interest in this passage. Notice that there are gates on every side of the city. In verse 25 of this chapter, we learn that these gates never shut. They are always open. There is free access to the place where God is. Since the city has the glory of God in her midst, we can conclude that anyone who has direct access to the city has direct access to God Himself. Gates on all four sides means that the access is easy. No matter where one will be in the new heavens and the new earth, there will always be easy access to God. For, as the beginning of the chapter has told us, God will dwell among His people, nevermore to take Himself away from his people.

If the gates are open, and there are angels standing at every gate, that means that there is no fear of attack on the city. Of course, angels guarding gates is nothing new. Angels guard the way back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:24. Cherubim guard the entrance to the most holy place of the tabernacle and the temple. They are present on the ark of the covenant. They exist to prevent evil things from invading the holy space where God is. They

will do the same thing in the new heavens and the new earth. However, since the gates are always open, that means that there will be no evil things to invade. So, instead of keeping people out of the Garden of Eden, as angels have done since the Fall, the angels will let God's people in. In other words, since Jesus died on the cross, ripping the veil of the temple in two, he has given us access to the most holy place of the temple, which is in heaven, which will come down out of heaven, and be the New Jerusalem. We will be the most holy place where God lives.

So what should we take from this? Well, all of this helps us to understand what the Psalmist is talking about in Psalm 84: "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." Do you long for this new Jerusalem to come down out of heaven? Do you long to be a part of it as the Psalmist did? The Psalmist goes on to say, "Blessed are those who dwell in Your house." John might modify that verse a little bit to say, "Blessed are those who are Your House, in which God dwells"! The psalmist says "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." Is that true of us? Would we rather spend a day in God's house, a foretaste of heavenly worship, than do anything else? Where are our hearts and minds? When we eat together as a church, do we look at that time as a practice run for the wedding supper of the Lamb? So do you long for the tabernacle of the Lord of hosts?

Secondly, are you working on your stone? If Peter tells us that we are living stones being built in to the house of the living Lord, then are we working on the shape of our stone? By that I mean, "Are we honing that stone so that it will fit where it belongs?" All too often, we think of ourselves as the foundation stone, the capstone, the most important stone. We already know what the most important stones are. The ultimate foundation of the new Jerusalem is Jesus Christ Himself. The foundation stones are the apostles. The gates are the twelve tribes of Israel. The most any of us will be is a single stone in the temple. If our stone is not correctly cut and finished, then we will look quite out of place. We will stick out of the wall like a sore thumb! We need to smooth out the rough edges, and smooth out the sides so that we fit where we are supposed to go. Most of the time, we expect other people to fit around us. We have it backwards. We need to think about how we fit in with those around us. Of course, this applies to the church. We will

never fit into the world. The world is building something quite different. It is building with much inferior building materials. The world builds with papier-mache. A stone will fall right through what they are building.

The whole people of God are together in the end. The Israel of God is the city of Zion, which is the new Jerusalem, which is the new Holy of Holies, which is the place where God will dwell. Do you want to be a part of it?