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The Garden of God

Revelation 22.1-5

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Before I read the next scripture, which is from the book of Revelation, I want to provide a little background. Revelation is a type of literature that's called apocalyptic, it's meant to reveal things that may not otherwise be known. Because the message was intended for people under stress and often in danger from enemies, apocalyptic writers used coded language, metaphors, and allusions, which only the intended audience could interpret properly. For example, if I said yesterday the Angels were trampled by the Twins, but the Cardinals snuck by the Brewers, insiders who know can interpret that news correctly while others can only speculate or guess what I'm talking about. It sounds vaguely religious with Angels and Cardinals.

The book of Revelation has been misunderstood and misinterpreted ever since it was written. The difficulty of understanding Revelation is evidenced by the fact that it's the only New Testament book John Calvin didn't write a commentary about, but Revelation plays an important role in the Bible. The Revelation to John is a series of **visions for the church in crisis** at the end of the first century. The first-century church was confronted by the tremendous power of the Roman Empire. The Apostle Paul, who was a Roman citizen, wrote decades earlier that those in governmental authority were put there by God, and that Christians were to submit to those in authority, but by the time Revelation was composed, John's view of the Roman government was completely different. Revelation describes a government acting in corrupt, unjust, and wicked ways, exploiting its power and authority to the point of persecuting believers. In a period of history marked by violence, materialism, and selfishness, a gifted, courageous disciple recorded visions that sustained his Christian contemporaries and have brought comfort to the Christian church ever since.

I'll be sharing a passage from Revelation that's a brief vision of heaven as we conclude our series on The Gardens of God. Lots of folks have ideas about heaven and the soul. An ad for American Standard said in large letters, *Bathrooms made for the soul*. Another ad stated, *They say the soul lives on. And it does*. That was an ad for a

Chrysler car. Here's another – *This just in: Apparently heaven does exist.* Those words appeared next to photos of three Wendy's hamburgers. The Bible's vision of heaven is a little more substantial than a nice bathroom, a car, and a burger.

The ancient human yearning to believe in a life beyond this life is still strong. Many songs that aren't spiritual or religious mention heaven. Some of our older folks can recall Irving Berlin wrote: *"Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak; and I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing, cheek to cheek."* Belinda Carlisle sang, *"Heaven is a place on earth."* Los Lonely Boys had a hit song in 2003 titled *Heaven* that said in part, *"only you can save me now from this misery. I've been lost in my own place and I'm gettin' weary. How far is heaven? And I know that I need to change my ways of livin'. How far is heaven? Lord, can you tell me. I've been locked up way too long in this crazy world. How far is heaven?"*

The story of the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a garden in heaven. Genesis opens with the Garden of Eden—a place of beauty, abundance, and intimate fellowship with God. Revelation closes with a vision of the Garden of God, a restored and perfected paradise where God's people dwell with God forever. Today, we're going to hear Revelation 22:1-5 a passage about hope, healing, and the presence of God.

"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."

After humanity's fall in Eden, the story of the Bible becomes a spiritual journey back home—a quest to return to what was lost. But the destination is not merely Eden restored; it's Eden surpassed. Revelation 22 describes the final, glorious fulfillment of

God's purpose: a new creation where paradise is regained and improved, where the presence of God is not just restored but magnified. The imagery of the river and the tree of life represents eternal sustenance and healing, connecting deeply to the original Garden of Eden, where life was abundant and untainted. In both gardens, these symbols underscore the close relationship between God and humanity.

John sees *“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”* (v.1). In the ancient world, water was precious, often scarce, and dearly valued. Here, the river flows freely, abundantly, and eternally from the throne, symbolizing the unending life and blessing that comes from God. This river echoes the one in Eden (Genesis 2:10) and fulfills the words of Ezekiel 47 and Psalm 36 which we heard earlier, where a river brings life, healing, and joy to the people of God. In Revelation, it's the very life of God, offered freely to all who dwell in God's presence. The river of life and the twelve kinds of fruit symbolize God's provision and grace, demonstrating that life is not only sustained but flourishes. This abundance speaks to the spiritual nourishment that we can experience now, assuring us of God's continual presence and care. Understanding this promise can help shift our focus from scarcity to gratitude and generosity in our daily lives.

On either side of the river stands **the tree of life**, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding fruit **every month**, so there is never a time of scarcity, and **its leaves are for the healing of the nations** (v.2). In Eden, access to the tree of life was lost because of sin. Now, in the Garden of God, that access is restored—open and unhindered. The tree's fruitfulness speaks of abundance; **its leaves bring healing**, signaling the end of division, pain, and suffering. No longer is there a curse—no more sorrow, death, or separation from God. The nations, once scattered and wounded by sin, violence, and war are now healed and united in the presence of God. One of the things we see here and throughout Revelation is the inclusiveness of heaven.

**Revelation 7:9** declares, *“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before **the throne** and before **the Lamb**, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”* John sees a multitude so great he can't count them. These people are

from all over the world from every nation and language. One thing Christians need to be sensitive to is that we're part of a global family of God and we have sisters and brothers all over the world, including places like Palestine, Ukraine, Central America, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many of them in far more difficult circumstances than we face in the US. While it may sound strange to some people, as Christians our first allegiance above all others including our country is to God. To think otherwise is to be guilty of idolatry, because the first commandment is we shall have no other gods before the Lord. Too often some Christians think of the church in terms of their local congregation or their limited personal experience, rather than as an international community of more than a billion people with a history that stretches back almost 2,000 years in dozens and dozens of countries. In Revelation, John was giving the seven small, struggling relatively new congregations to which he was writing a broader vision of the church to which they belonged. That church is inclusive of all kinds of people from everywhere. It was mentioned during the coverage of Pope Francis's funeral that the Roman Catholic Church has voting cardinals in more than 70 different nations and as American Baptists we have global servants and partners in a similar number of countries. In the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus told the disciples that he had, *"Other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also so there will be one flock, one shepherd."* This word of Jesus is fulfilled in John's vision of heaven. **We see the inclusiveness of heaven in Revelation and in the Garden of God.**

**Revelation 2:3**, *"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.**"* Worship is what we're going to be doing a lot in heaven. Many pop culture notions of heaven have to do with a place where things are focused on you – in John's vision of heaven the focus is on God, and everyone is worshiping the Lord in praise, prayer, and song. I've been at Fenway Park when over 35,000 people were making as much noise as they possibly could. I've been at concerts where a band was playing incredibly loud music and thousands of people were singing at the top of their lungs – I can't comprehend the sound of more people than I could count singing together with loud voices - *"Salvation belongs to our **God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!**"*

Worship is what human beings were created for; our purpose in life is to worship God. God focused worship also benefits us significantly. Worship dispels loneliness and helps us feel part of a larger community. Worship brings hope when life is hard. Worship counters self-centeredness and reminds us that life is not all about us. Worship reminds us of important values we may forget. Worship strengthens our courage. Worship brings us a sense of forgiveness. Worship gives us the opportunity to express praise and thanks. Worship renews our faith when it's weakening. Worship empowers creativity – think of the art, music, writing and architecture that have been inspired by the worship of God. Worship is a form of prayer that brings positive change to people. Worship calls us out of who we are to who we may yet become with God's help. Worship is a transcendent experience that helps us stand apart from our lives and see reality more clearly. All these aspects of worship are preparing us for worship in heaven.

The greatest blessing of the Garden of God is not the river or the tree of life, but God. *"They will see his face...the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever"* (vv.4-5). To see God's face is to experience perfect love and joy. God's name on our foreheads marks us as God's forever. There's no more night—no more fear, confusion, or darkness—because the Lord is our light. This final garden is not just a return to what was lost, but the fulfillment of all God intended. In Eden, humanity was called to reign and steward creation. In the Garden of God, that calling is restored and perfected: *"they will reign forever and ever."* The story ends not with loss, but with glory—paradise regained and improved, where God's people dwell with the Lord in unending joy. Knowing how the story ends makes all the difference in the world.

Author Mitch Albom wrote a best-selling novel in 2003, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. In an interview with Barbara Walters he said, *"There's one thing I would say about heaven. **If you believe that there's a heaven, your life here on Earth is different.** You may believe that you're gonna see your loved ones again. So the grief that you had after they're gone isn't as strong. You may believe that you'll have to answer for your actions. So the way you behave here on Earth is changed."*

We can't possibly know all there is to know about heaven – John is attempting to describe the indescribable. None of us knows all there is to know about heaven, but I

know this – if you want to go there, then believe both that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross that your sins may be forgiven, and that he wants you to live as he taught his followers to live, and share with others this life changing good news.

The Bible's story is our story—a journey from loss to restoration, from exile to homecoming. We all can reflect on where we are on this journey. The Garden of God is open to all who trust in Jesus Christ, who has opened the way for us. The promise of the river, the tree, the healing, and the light is for those who overcome, who long for God's presence, and who follow the call to come home. Let's fix our eyes on this hope. Let's live as those who belong to God, embodying the values of love, kindness, mercy, service, and generosity, reflecting the character of Christ in all our interactions. By actively demonstrating the hope of God's kingdom, we can witness to the world that the Garden of God is not just a distant future, but a present reality lived out through us.

**The Bible begins and ends in a garden.** In the second chapter of the Bible, Genesis 2:9 states, “*Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, **the tree of life also in the midst of the garden.***” In the final book of the Bible, Revelation 22:2b describes heaven, “*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.***” It's in the garden of God that we and all people who love and trust God will ultimately find healing, wholeness, life, love, and peace.

**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, we thank you with grateful hearts, for the vision of your heavenly garden where Your presence brings eternal life and abundant grace. Thank You for the river of life that flows from Your throne, reminding us of the nourishment and healing we find in You. Help us to be instruments of peace and healing in our families, church, communities, and nation, reflecting Your love and mercy to all we encounter. As we seek to live as citizens of Your kingdom, guide us to deepen our fellowship with You and each other, embracing the hope and transformation You offer. May our lives and actions embody the light of Your presence, shining brightly in a world yearning for healing, peace, and joy. Lead us to the paths that align with Your purposes and strengthen our faith as we journey toward your Garden. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. **Symbolism of the Garden:** How do you interpret the imagery of the river and the tree of life in Revelation 22? In what ways do these symbols connect to the original Garden of Eden in Genesis?
2. **Eternal Life and Abundance:** The passage mentions the "river of the water of life" and "twelve kinds of fruit." What do these elements suggest about God's promises for eternal life and abundance? How can these promises influence our lives today?
3. **Healing of the Nations:** Verse 2 states that the leaves of the tree are for "the healing of the nations." What does this healing signify in the context of today's world? How can we actively participate in this healing process in our communities?
4. **Presence of God:** In the Garden of God, it's mentioned that people will "see his face." What does this intimate fellowship with God mean to you? How might this vision of God's presence change the way you approach your relationship with Him now?
5. **Restoration vs. Return:** The sermon emphasizes that the Garden of God represents not just a return to Eden, but a fulfillment of God's purpose. In what ways do you see your faith journey as a movement toward restoration rather than just a return to previous experiences?
6. **Living as Citizens of the Garden:** How can we live as if we are already part of the Garden of God? What practical steps can we take to embody the values of this future hope in our daily lives?
7. **Personal Reflections:** The sermon closes with a challenge to assess whether we are on our way to the Garden. Reflect on your own spiritual journey. What steps do you feel prompted to take to align yourself more closely with the vision of the Garden of God presented in Revelation 22?