

August 14 Lesson 11 (NIV)

A NEW CITY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Revelation 21:10–21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Revelation 21:10–27

REVELATION 21:10–21

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵ The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶ The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. ¹⁷ The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. ¹⁸ The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰ the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

KEY VERSE

The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.—Revelation 21:14

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 3: The Great Hope of the Saints

LESSONS 10–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

berylber-ul.

chalcedonykal-sed-uh-nee.

chrysolitekris-uh-lite.

jacinthjay-sinth.

sardiussard-ee-us.

onyxahn-iks.

Introduction

A. Beauty in the Irish Countryside

I lost my breath when visiting the St. Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Ireland. As I explored the historic building, heard the cathedral's bells, and gazed through the cathedral's windows, its beauty overwhelmed me.

Even the cathedral's surroundings stunned me. One side of the cathedral overlooked the sea and brilliantly colored trees. On the other side, multicolored houses and the buildings of the town surrounded the cathedral. The sight of this cathedral and its surroundings was a glimpse of God's glory revealed in and through the Irish countryside.

While beautiful and stunning, St. Colman’s Cathedral is only a pale reflection of the place God has prepared for his people. The apostle John was shown a vision of this heavenly place—one more eternal and more beautiful than an Irish cathedral.

B. Lesson Context

First century Greco-Roman cities—such as Rome, Athens, and Corinth—were often spoken of in high regard by ancient philosophers and writers. They would go to great lengths to laud a city’s accomplishments, while providing stirring descriptions of the city for unfamiliar readers. In today’s Scripture text, John sees a great city coming from the heavens. He describes it in a manner that stirs the hearts of believers for what they can expect.

Prophetic visions of a city of God were not uncommon in biblical and Jewish texts. The psalmist described the beauty of the city of God, forever made secure by the presence of God (Psalm 48). The prophet Isaiah envisioned the centrality of God’s city, Jerusalem, in the last days (Isaiah 2:2–3). This New Jerusalem would be the source of joy for all God’s people (65:17–19).

Tobit, a Jewish text written in the intertestamental period, describes a heavenly Jerusalem, very similar to John’s. The city would be rebuilt with precious stones and gold; it would become a place where the God of Israel would be worshipped (Tobit 13:16–18).

A vision of the prophet Ezekiel provides the most notable Old Testament comparison to John’s vision. Ezekiel was taken to a mountain and shown a vision of what appeared to be a city (Ezekiel 40:2). The bulk of Ezekiel’s vision includes the dimensions of a heavenly temple and its courts to reflect God’s glory (40:5–43:12). The vision includes a life-giving river flowing from the temple (47:1–12), and the boundaries and divisions of a reestablished Israel (47:13–48:29). The vision culminates as Ezekiel sees the gates and dimensions of the city (48:30–35).

A close comparison between the visions of Ezekiel and John will reveal differences. However, John’s vision is in fundamental harmony with the theological tradition that was at the heart of Ezekiel’s. Throughout history, God’s people have held firmly to the truth that God will provide for his people at the end of time. These visions, while not necessarily depicting a physical location, nevertheless point to God’s faithfulness to his people.

I. The City’s Descent

(REVELATION 21:10–14)

A. Eternal Glory (vv. 10–11)

10a. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high,

John describes how *he was carried* by “one of the seven angels” (Revelation 21:9). Since he asserts that this experience took place *in the Spirit*, we can infer that this was a vision (compare 1:10; 4:2; 17:3).

Throughout Israel’s history, mountains had great significance. At Mount Sinai, Moses received the law from God (Exodus 19:2–25) and the stipulations for proper worship (24:15–31:18). On Mount Nebo, God showed a dying Moses the promised land (Deuteronomy 34:1–4). Ezekiel described being taken to a *mountain* where he saw a heavenly city and a rebuilt temple (Ezekiel 40:2–4; see Lesson Context).

10b. and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

From his vantage point, John saw *the Holy City of Jerusalem*. But this city shared only its name with the terrestrial Jerusalem. God will establish this New Jerusalem. It will be the place where he will dwell with his people—his bride (Revelation 21:2).

Many prophets held expectant hope for a New Jerusalem. Zechariah anticipated the manifestation of the Lord's glory in this city (Zechariah 2:4–5, 10–13). God's people would gather in peace among the nations (8:3–6, 20–23). Isaiah highlighted the city's splendor in God's new creation (Isaiah 65:17–19), a city adorned with jewels (54:11–12).

The vision of the city *coming down out of heaven* serves as a representation of God's relationship with humanity. God's city, his dwelling place, will come down to be among his people. Mediation between God and humanity will no longer be needed. God will be present with his people in the city.

That the city is *from God* reminds people of the focus of their worship: it is directed to “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 21:6). He is worthy of the highest praise and honor from the city's citizens, the bride of Christ (21:9).

11. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

The glory of God was unmistakable as John looked at the New Jerusalem. He noted that celestial bodies were not needed as sources of light; God's glory lit up the city (Revelation 21:23). Regarding the brilliance of God's glory, the language of John's vision agrees with that of earlier heavenly visions (see Isaiah 60:1; Ezekiel 43:1–2).

John referred to *a very precious jewel* to provide a tangible parallel to the radiance of God's glory. Previously John had described God on his throne as having the appearance of *jasper* (Revelation 4:3).

John's poetic language obscures whether this jewel is the same as what we know as jasper today: a stone that is opaque, not *clear*. Perhaps a fuller understanding of the underlying Greek text would highlight the stone's radiance, like that of a *crystal*.

B. External Perspective (vv. 12–14)

12. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

A city's walls were a symbol of its strength and unity. A city without walls signaled weakness and disgrace (see Nehemiah 1:3–4; Proverbs 25:28).

However, the *wall* of New Jerusalem served a different purpose than an earthly wall. In John's vision, the heavenly city's enemies have been destroyed (Revelation 20:7–10, 13–15). Therefore, this wall does not serve to keep out adversaries. Rather, the *great* and *high* nature of the wall holds God's glory and purity (see 21:26–27).

The inclusion of *twelve gates* parallels Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 48:30–34). In Ezekiel's vision, each gate is named for a tribe of Israel. However, John's vision does not connect a particular tribe to a particular gate. All *the names of the twelve tribes of Israel* seem to be listed at each gate.

The 12 tribes of Israel were the foundation for God's people and, therefore, for New Jerusalem. The vision reassures all who would hear: all of God's people will be included in that city (compare Hebrews 11:39–40).

13. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.

As opposed to a singular city gate open for certain times (see Joshua 2:5), the multiple *gates* of New Jerusalem never close (Revelation 21:25). All the people of God, from all parts of the earth, are invited to enter the New Jerusalem. Individuals from every nation, tribe, and language will worship God in this city (see 7:9–10).

14. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

An ancient city's foundations were often laid on bedrock with only the upper foundation levels visible. As the New Jerusalem descended from Heaven (Revelation 3:12), every foundation was visible.

Twelve foundations, named for *the twelve apostles*, highlight the heavenly city's fundamental origin and source. The earliest Christians considered the apostles and ancient prophets to be the foundation of the church, with Christ—*the Lamb*—as the cornerstone (see Ephesians 2:19–21).

John highlights God's work in salvation history. The presence of both Israel and the church emphasize the scope of God's covenant people. In the New Jerusalem all God's people will be united so that God's glory might be on display.

II. The City's Detail

(REVELATION 21:15–21)

A. The Measurements (vv. 15–17)

15. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls.

The *angel who talked with John* used a *measuring rod* in order to *measure* the dimensions of New Jerusalem. The length of this rod likely ranged from 8 to 10 feet. However, modern equivalents to ancient measures are not always exact.

John had previously used a rod to measure “the temple of God and the altar, with its worshipers” (Revelation 11:1). However, in this instance, the angel provided a rod made *of gold*—appropriate for a golden city—to measure *the city, its gates and its walls*.

The image is reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision. At that time Ezekiel saw “a man whose appearance was like bronze” holding “a measuring rod” (Ezekiel 40:3). The man proceeded to measure the dimensions of the house of Israel (40:4–42:20). In both visions, Ezekiel's and John's, the act of measuring revealed the perfection of God's handiwork.

16. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long.

Each dimension of New Jerusalem—its *length*, *width*, and *height*—is identical. Therefore, *the city* measures as a cube, a three dimensional *square*. The temple of Ezekiel's vision measured equally in two dimensions: its length and height (Ezekiel 42:15–20; 45:2). However, the

dimensions of the New Jerusalem demonstrate the city's holiness. It is a visual representation of the statement, "The Lord is there" (48:35).

New Jerusalem resembles the dimensions of the inner sanctuary of the temple—the Most Holy Place where God's glory dwelt among Israel (1 Kings 6:20; 2 Chronicles 3:8–9). God in his glory will live with his people in New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:3). The city's dimensions draw attention to the holiness of the temple. In this heavenly city there is no need for the Most Holy Place. The whole city is, in essence, the Most Holy Place.

One stadion is the length of an ancient Greek racetrack, approximately 200 yards. Therefore, 12,000 *stadia* would be approximately 1,300 miles. The estimated volume of this city is a staggering 2 billion square miles! This fact has led some people to question the validity of John's vision. We can't imagine how John "saw" such vastness. But he was conveying what the Lord wanted to show him regarding the expanse and role of the city. It will be a place where God's glory is evident. God's saints from every era can worship him in this city (see Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 21:24–26).

17. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick.

The *measurement of 144 cubits* is equivalent to 72 yards. The underlying Greek text is unclear whether this dimension applied equally to the wall's thickness and height. Based on the city's dimensions, a *wall* of this size seems meager and not appropriate for the city. However, the wall's purpose is not to exclude his people.

Rather, the wall's dimensions possibly represent the 144,000 redeemed people noted in Revelation 7:4 and 14:1–3. Their inclusion in the city's design, along with the 12 tribes of Israel, the apostles, and the prophets, acknowledge the totality of God's people in this holy city.

B. The Materials (vv. 18–21)

18a. The wall was made of jasper,

John described God, sitting on his throne, as appearing "like a *jasper*" (Revelation 4:3). It is no coincidence that John envisioned the city's *wall* as of the same material. The radiance of God's presence surrounds the city (see 21:19).

18b. and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass.

The inclusion of *gold* in the eternal city might be making a reference to the original garden paradise (see Genesis 2:11–12). Once used to indicate a person's beauty or wealth (1 Peter 3:3; Revelation 3:18), gold now indicated the presence of God. The rare element has now become common, the material for constructing a whole *city*. Further, the city's purity was unparalleled, making it *pure as glass*, more refined than human hands can produce.

19–20. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.

For the *foundations of the city walls* to be built and *decorated with every kind of precious stone* was unusual and indicative of the city's heavenly nature. In the construction of ancient cities, the usage of gems and precious stones was reserved for the higher parts of the structure.

However, God does not reserve splendor or grandeur in the construction of his cities. The prophet Isaiah foresaw that Jerusalem would be rebuilt with precious stones and gems (see Isaiah 54:11–12). The beauty of New Jerusalem stands in direct contrast to earthly beauty (see Revelation 17:4) and temporary wealth (see 18:12).

This specific listing of precious stones is found only in this passage. However, specific stones are cited throughout Scripture. God on his throne and the glory of God are both imagined with the appearance of *jasper* and *ruby*—a stone older translations of Scripture might call sardius (see Revelation 4:3). The deep-blue shade of *sapphire* invites comparisons to lapis lazuli, another precious stone known for its blue shade (see Exodus 24:10). Modern understandings of *agate*—sometimes called chalcedony—view it as a type of quartz, although its meaning here is unclear. Previously, “a rainbow that shone like an *emerald*” surrounded God’s throne (Revelation 4:3). This passage is the only mention of *chrysolite*, *beryl*, *topaz*, *turquoise*, *jacinth*, and *amethyst* in the New Testament.

This listing of precious stones invites comparison to another listing of precious stones: those included in the high priest’s breastplate (Exodus 28:15–20). While a comparison between the listings would highlight dissimilarities, these could be explained by differences of original language. The mention of different stones in the Old and New Testament (and in various Bible versions) assigns different names for some stones. Therefore, the stones cannot be identified with absolute certainty.

The New Jerusalem is without a temple because the mediatory work of the priests is no longer needed. God dwells with his people as among a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The foundation stones serve as an “outerwear” for the heavenly city, just as stones were utilized for the outerwear of Israel’s high priests.

Further, John previously heard the declaration of “the wedding of the Lamb” to his bride (Revelation 19:7). The bride—God’s chosen and redeemed people—has readied herself for the union with the bridegroom. The heavenly city is described as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:9; see 21:2). Its ornate and precious jewels are like those worn by a bride on her wedding day (see Isaiah 61:10).

21a. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.

John previously described two details of *the twelve gates* of the heavenly city. The gates included 12 angels and the names of the tribes of Israel (see Revelation 21:12, above). In ancient times, *pearls* were extremely valuable and enormously costly (see Matthew 13:45–46). Further, given the size of the wall (144 cubits), these pearls would have been unnaturally large and unfathomably valuable.

21b. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

Even behind its walls, the city displays incredible beauty. John speaks only of a singular *street* made of *gold*. However, *the city* may include other roads besides this “Main Street.” Like the jasper of the city’s walls (Revelation 21:18), the *pure* gold is as *transparent* as *glass*. Even the city’s road is more refined and more valuable than human equivalents.

God’s glory and the idea of life are represented by this refined street. John would describe a “river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God” and flowing down the middle of this golden street (Revelation 22:1). Like trees lining a boulevard, the tree of life stood on both sides of the street, somehow (22:2).

God displays beauty for his people. But more importantly, God will bring new life. Ultimately, he will restore his creation for his glory.

Conclusion

A. There Will Be No Place Like It!

Approximately 500 miles southeast from St. Colman's Cathedral sits the royal chapel of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, France. While the 700-year-old chapel is small and unassuming, its size is not its main draw. Instead, the chapel's massive and delicate stained glass features are its claim to fame.

Over 1,000 individual biblical and historical scenes are depicted in stained glass, arranged across 15 windows, each approximately 50 feet high. As the sun shines across Paris and pours through the stained-glass, the chapel's nave lights up with hues of blues, reds, and greens.

The apostle John used vivid language to describe a glorious and splendid heavenly city. Unlike earthly cities, the heavenly city glows with the brightness of God's glory. God's glory shines through the city, more vivid and illuminating than sunlight. Our hope as believers is that we will someday worship God in that beautiful, heavenly city. There will be no place like it!

B. Prayer

Creator God, you are a God of beauty. Thank you for glimpses of your glory that we see through your creation. Help us to share with others what you have done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's glory is evident for all to see.¹
