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Beverly ECC (Chicago, IL)

“THE HOLY CITY”

Revelation 21:10, 16, 22-27; 22:1-5

☑ I speak for Beth as well as myself when I say the time leading up to AmyLynn’s birth was among the most physically and emotionally wrenching of our lives.

Beth suffered extreme, unrelenting nausea, vomiting and dehydration for the first few months. She lost 22 pounds in 14 days. She was hospitalized for IV therapy, and made periodic ER visits for rehydration.

Later Beth developed pregnancy-induced hypertension. All the fluid she lost returned, and a lot more besides. She swelled up like a balloon.

A great deal of pain and yuck were packed into those months. We groaned for the suffering to be over, for the hardship to be done. We groaned for an end.

● The words of Romans 8:22 took on new meaning for us: “**All creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**”

But there was another, different kind of groaning going on for us.

☑ Five and ½ weeks before her due date, Beth went into labor. For the next several days she lay on her side in a darkened room, her head lower than her feet. She was given magnesium sulfate to stop the contractions and steroids to build up AmyLynn’s lungs.

At the five week mark our obstetrician pulled the meds. The delivery could hardly come fast enough for us.

We groaned in anticipation of our baby’s arrival, for our new stage of life to start. We groaned for a beginning.

Finally, AmyLynn was born and I took her in my arms. I could not stop laughing, and I could not stop weeping tears of joy and gratitude and relief.

● It gave us fresh insight into Romans 8:19: “**All creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are.**”

It is obvious what the creation is groaning for to end: brokenness, sin, decay and death. But *for what beginning does it groan?*

Please turn with me to Revelation 21.

☐ Verse 10: “**And he**” (an angel) “**carried me away in the Spirit... and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.**”

★ In what direction does the city move? Down. Our ultimate hope is not that God’s people will escape the earth and go to heaven; it is that God will bring heaven to his people on earth.

→ Hence Jesus promises, {Mt 5:5} “**Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**” Hence Jesus teaches us to pray, {Mt 6:10} “**Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**” Hence the angels announced that the redeemed “**will reign on the earth**” (Revelation 5:10).

☉ When {21:4} “**the old order of things has passed away**” God will integrate the New Jerusalem into the corporeal world. That is the new beginning for which creation groans. But *what is involved?*

☐ In verse 16 we see that the Holy City is “**as wide and high as it is long.**” It is a perfect cube.

★ This cubic shape matches the form of the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary in the tabernacle and the temple {1 Ki 6:20}. For much of the Old Testament era God the Father filled the Holy of Holies with his own glorious presence. Likewise, New Jerusalem will serve as the Most Holy Place in which God visibly dwell.

□ Moving on to verse 22, John writes: **“I did not see a temple in the city, because the LORD God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”**

★ Since the Holy of Holies was the LORD's earthly sanctuary, the larger temple facility served as the designated point of contact between God and Israel. But in the New Jerusalem there is no need for such a structure. God is the temple. Nothing will hinder our worship of him and fellowship with him.

If you feel blasé about this, wake up!

→ Moses saw the burning bush and heard God's voice. But when he asked to see God's glory the LORD replied, **“You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”**

→ Holy God blessed Isaiah with the clearest fore-knowledge of the Messiah. Yet when the LORD granted him a terrifying glimpse of his presence, he cried out: {Is 6:5} **“Woe to me! I am ruined!”**

→ The Almighty gave Ezekiel the most extensive vision of his throne room. He got a peek at {Ezek 1:28} **“the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”** He **“fell facedown,”** like a dead man.

→ Going back to the Holy of Holies, the only human being authorized to enter it was the Jewish high priest. Even he was allowed in only one day a year.

● Yet the followers of Jesus will live forever in God's presence. The Lamb has **“made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God”** (Rev 5:10). Rev 7:15: they **“are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.”**

Look at the amazing blessings that come of this!

□ Verses 23, 25 and 22:5a: **“The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine... for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.... On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.... They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the LORD God will give them light.”**

Fear of the dark is often unfounded, but not always. It *is* easier to lose your way, to trip and get hurt, and to be taken by surprise by a predator in the dark. In Scripture darkness is equated with ignorance, folly, spiritual blindness, immorality, terror, bondage, and death. At its worst, darkness embodies Satan's kingdom.

✧ In contrast light symbolizes life, revelation, truth and wisdom, God's favor, the likeness of God in his children, and holiness.

☼ The Father is the source of light. He {1 Jn 1:5} **“is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”** {2 Ch 5:13-14} His glory filled the Holy of Holies like a glowing cloud.

☼ The Son is the vessel of {Jn 1:4-5} **“life”** that is **“the light of all people.”** At his transfiguration, his {Mt 17:2} **“face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”**

☼ The Spirit is {Jn 14:17} **“the Spirit of truth”** who enlightens us. The primary visual manifestation of his descent at Pentecost was {Acts 2:3} **“tongues of fire.”**

There is only light in the city because God is present, and God’s people are totally present to him.

☼ **“All creation is waiting eagerly for”** the light to vanquish the darkness once and for all.

☐ Continuing with Revelation 22:1 and 2:

**Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.**

Spiritual thirst and hunger with no hope of satisfaction is torture. Consider the agony of forever craving peace and wholeness and joy without fulfillment! This is the cause of much greed, immorality, addiction, and violence.

Still, desire is not the problem; in fact, it is a gift from the Creator. He planted it in our hearts so we will seek him and receive his fullness. The problem is, we try to fill our hunger with every-thing but him. {Is 55:2} **“Why spend your money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?”**

We will not do that in the New Jerusalem. Instead, we will {Jn 10:10} **“have life, and have it to the full.”**

Eternal life is not only a matter of quantity. It is not merely an endless *extension* of existence. In addition to that it is the intersection of ever- increasing purpose with an ever-expanding capacity for fulfillment. It is finding a fresh adventure around every corner. It is being filled to bursting with God’s goodness, only to learn we can receive even more the next day. It is continuous, explosive growth in love, strength and beauty.

☐ Revelation 22:3 summarizes eternal life in its negative aspect (that is, in terms of what it *is not*): **“No longer will there be any curse.”**

☼ **“All creation is waiting eagerly”** to drink deeply of the water of life and to eat freely of the tree of life.

☐ Revelation 22:3b and 4 remind us of the source of all this goodness: **“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”**

☞ The keys to every promise in Revelation 21 and 22 are God’s unveiled presence and the quality of his people’s relationship with him.

● As for that relationship, **“his name will be on their foreheads.”** The Old Testament high priest wore a turban with a gold tablet, upon which was inscribed the phrase: {Ex 28:36} **“HOLY TO THE LORD,”** **“HOLY TO YHWH,”** which is God’s personal name. This is a degree of closeness we won’t be able to imagine until **“the Holy City... [comes] down.”**

✪ “**All creation is waiting eagerly**” to relate to God in total, unbroken intimacy.

All of this is very happy news!

But there is a hard word in this.

☐ Revelation 21:27: “**Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.**”

What hope is there for any of us, then? We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, do we not?

Of course; but sin is not the issue here: repentance is. All people who agree with God that their sin *is sin*, who humble themselves and ask God’s forgiveness, who trust in the blood of the Lamb to erase sin’s guilt and break its hold on them, and who strive to live in the freedom of righteousness, are pure in the eyes of Holy God. Their names are in the book of life.

But people who deny that their sin is sin, who do not humbly ask God’s forgiveness, who do not trust the Lamb, who keep submitting to bondage as {2 Pe 2:22} “**A dog returns to its vomit,**” and, “**A Sow...goes back to her wallowing in the mud**” – these God sees as impure.

Their names are not written in the book of life. These will not live in the light, drink the living water, eat from the tree of life, or serve the LORD and wear his name on their foreheads.

What could be worse? What could be more tragic?

I began with the story of Beth’s pregnancy with AmyLynn. The groaning of pain and frustration and concern was well worth the new life that began with her

birth, not only for our daughter but for us as well. (The same was true with Hannah and Emily.)

“**All creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.**” It is still “**waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are.**”

The waiting is hard. But praise God! When “**the Holy City, Jerusalem,**” finally comes “**down out of heaven from God,**” it will be worth every groan.