

“No Night”

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-4; 21:22-22:5

Rev. Chuck Williamson

May 25, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

When Elie Wiesel, recipient of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize and holocaust survivor, wrote about his experience of the holocaust, he called the book Night. He was 15 years old when his parents and three sisters were taken to various concentration camps. His mother and younger sister died at Auschwitz. He was sent with his father to Buchenwald where his father died. In the book Wiesel describes the horror, the inhumanity, the deprivation that were the holocaust. He has entitled the book Night.

No wonder. I cannot imagine a darker period of human history. It was a time when people's faith was tested to the limit, when hope seemed futile, when there seemed to be no light, only darkness.

We know about night—a child's fear of the dark. We use words like “shadowy” to describe people that are sly, mysterious, shady. We know about night and the dark side.

In contrast to the shadowy, fearful darkness of night, John here in revelation paints an entirely different picture. John describes heaven as a cascade of light. In John's vision, he sees that the gates of heaven will never be shut by day. Now we might think that the next sentence is going to read: “but they are shut at night.” Except John says: “There will be no night there.” The gates of heaven are never shut; they are open 24/7, ready to welcome all who enter.

Here John gives us a description of the heavenly city—“It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel.” In its great high walls are all sorts of rare and precious gems—sapphire, agate, emerald, topaz, amethyst, and others I have never heard of. What makes those jewels so valuable is the beautiful things they do to light. Picture the way light dances in the bright green emerald or the rich blue sapphire. See the shine of the light on the streets of gold.

Eugene Peterson, in his commentary on Revelation, describes it this way:

The light of heaven is not the blur of a forty watt bulb, hanging naked in the night; it is colors, light that reveals the specific hue and texture of everything in creation. In the light we see not only objects, but also their dazzling, light-charged beauty. In the darkness nothing is visible, in the dusk “all cats are gray,” but in the light we are surrounded by and washed in an exuberant Niagara of color (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 180).

It's a bright and beautiful picture—this heavenly city. But what does it mean? Why did John include this picture of heaven in his writing? Let's go back about 19 centuries. Revelation was written during the dark days of the early Christian church, during the time that felt for many of them like the holocaust. Persecution was on the rise; Christians were being rounded up and thrown in jail. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death because of his proclamation of the good news about Jesus. Christians were meeting secretly for fear of the Roman authorities who saw Christianity as a threat to the emperor. Here was the struggling little group of Christians standing over against the overwhelming power of Rome. The only thing they had to hold on to was their faith in God and their hope.

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It was for that struggling group of Christians—who feared that at any moment they may be swallowed by the darkness of the power of Rome—that John painted this picture of God’s light. It’s a picture of the future, a picture of what will be, a picture of what God has prepared for us.

What did John want his fellow Christians to know about the future? Above all else, he wanted them to know that the Lord God almighty reigns. In the New Testament, the word “almighty” is used to describe God ten times, and nine of them occur here in the book of Revelation. John wanted those Christians, who felt that they were at the mercy of the power of Rome, to know that God’s power is greater still.

In that day people were probably saying, “The future belongs to Rome.” In our day, people may say things like “The future belongs to whoever has the power; might makes right.” Others who look at things economically might say “The future belongs to the rich.” Or maybe, “The future belongs to China.” Others look at technology and say, “The future belongs to AI.” To all that, Revelation says No. Beyond all our human strength, our military might, our economic muscle, our technological advances, is the power of God Almighty. Revelation sings, “The future belongs to God.”

It reminds me of what one of my preacher friends often says: “We may not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.”

Revelation promised to those caught up in the middle of the persecutions of that day that God is in charge, and that God’s will shall be done. The Lord God almighty reigns.

There is a lot to the picture of heaven that John gives us here. John reminds us that the one who is sitting on the heavenly throne—God almighty—is the same one who gave his son to die for our salvation. The one whose power is greater than any other power is using that power for love. The Lord God almighty wills our salvation. The God of power is a God of love.

There is another thing that we can say about John’s vision of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. I think it is interesting that John chose the image of a city. If you would ask most people what they think heaven is like, they might choose a more pastoral image—countryside, peaceful, the sounds of nature with a babbling brook, something more like the Garden of Eden. John could have chosen that image for his picture of heaven, but instead he opted for a city. Interestingly enough, when St. Augustine described the Kingdom of God, he too used the image of the City of God.

Revelation paints a picture of heaven as being like a city. So why a city? A city is a place where people are brought together. And a city is made up of many different types of people. At its best a city brings this variety of people together. In the city, we are interdependent. The city at its best is where people mix and mingle, where each person does his or her part for the good of the whole. No one can do it all, but with all pulling together the city lives and thrives.

To be clear, this heavenly city will be a different kind of city than what we know here on earth.

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In the heavenly city there will be no hospitals or mortuaries or psychiatrists, because God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be grieving nor crying nor pain. In the heavenly city there will be no street lights to ward off the darkness because God's light will shine into every corner.

In the heavenly city politicians and governments will have no place because the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

In the heavenly city there will not even be any blustery preachers because there will be no need to remind people of the presence of God.

I like the idea of heaven being like a city...not a city with horns honking and sirens blaring and people locked behind deadbolts, but a city where all sorts of people are brought together.

And I think that from time to time, we can catch glimpses of that heavenly city even now. Before I retired, I was the pastor of Philadelphia Presbyterian Church in Mint Hill. Philadelphia is one of the historic Presbyterian churches that dates back to before the Revolutionary War. It was founded in 1770. The church has been on its present site since 1825. But before the church moved to where it's now located, it was located over on what is now Highway 51. It had a cemetery there. For its first hundred years Philadelphia had black members and white members—the church records from those early days list the membership like that—so many white members and so many black members. The church cemetery was encircled by a rock wall. Whenever a white member of the church died, that person was buried inside the rock wall. Whenever a black member of the church died, that person was buried outside the rock wall. Back then it was clear who was IN and who was OUT.

But several years ago a group of men from the church started working at that historic cemetery to restore it. It had gotten overgrown with weeds; limbs and trees had fallen; many of the headstones had been broken. So this group of men started to work. One of the first things they did was to put up a new wrought-iron fence—around the whole cemetery. So that now everyone buried there—black and white—everyone is inside the fence. All are included in the people of God.

I like this image of heaven being like a city where all sorts of people are brought together. And I like to think that maybe that's what the church is called to be.

I have a friend who grew up in Oklahoma, and he tells about one time when a new agricultural extension agent—fresh out of Oklahoma State—came to the area, and he tried to show these old “set in their ways” farmers some new farming techniques. But the farmers figured what did this kid know. So he got an idea. He set up a demonstration plot and grew his crops using the latest techniques. And when these old farmers passed by and saw how much healthier and productive his crops were, they decided to learn more.

I think that the church can be like that demonstration plot—where those passing by can see a diverse group of people—rich, poor, black, white, Republican, Democrat—all living and working together for good.

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I don't think I'm telling you something that you don't already know when I say that we are living in a divided nation these days, when there are some subjects that you don't talk about because they are too inflammatory. There is a lot of talk of who is IN and who is OUT, who is deserving and who is not. I have this hope—maybe it's unrealistic—that maybe the church can be a demonstration plot, and in the ways that we Christians relate to others with whom we disagree, we can help other people catch a glimpse of the way things can be, maybe even a little glimpse of the unity that we will one day experience in the heavenly city.

So that is the picture that John painted for those people who were living in a divided world. And I think that John painted this picture because he knew that what people believe about the future is what enables people to live faithfully in the present.

Such it is with the heavenly city. What we believe about the future has an impact on how we live now. This book of Revelation does not pretend that there are no hurts or disappointments or failures in life, but it does declare that they are never the last word. The last word is always light and life, lived in the presence of the almighty and all loving God. That is what the future holds for you and for me. And it is that hope for the future that enables us to live each day. Thanks be to God.