

**<sup>9</sup> One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. <sup>14</sup> The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.**

**<sup>15</sup> The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. <sup>16</sup> 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<sup>[c]</sup> in length, and as wide and high as it is long. <sup>17</sup> The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits<sup>[d]</sup> thick.<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>18</sup> The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>[f]</sup> <sup>21</sup> 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.**

**<sup>22</sup> I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. <sup>23</sup> The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.**

What does the future hold for our church? Maybe that question has been on your mind recently. Anytime Pastor Degner gets a call, we wrestle with some worries, don't we? What if he takes it? If he does, what's gonna happen to the ministry we carry out together here? What's gonna happen to our church?

We could ask the same when it comes to our church *body*, the WELS. What does the future hold for us? Synod leaders have been running statistics. We've been experiencing a decline in membership, and if the trend continues as it is, our synod could only have a quarter of its current membership and churches in 30 years. It might lead us to worry: What's gonna happen to the WELS?

We're not the first Christians who have asked such questions and wrestled with such worries. I'm sure that John did, too. The church in his day was experiencing powerful waves of persecution and false teaching. John was in exile; miles of ocean separated him from the churches he served as pastor in Asia Minor. I'm sure he wondered: What's gonna happen to my churches? What does the future hold for *the Church*?

That's why the One who holds the future of the Church in his hands appeared to John there. In visions he recorded in Revelation, the risen Jesus showed John that, yes, the Church on earth will struggle. Sometimes, it will even appear to be losing. But Jesus' triumph over sin and death guarantees the Church's triumph, too. Jesus answers John's worries and ours about the future of the Church by showing us the eternal future of the Church. *Your* eternal future: The Church made perfectly beautiful.

Can you picture in your mind what John saw? It's a city like none other. First, in shape: John says it is **as wide and high as it is long**. This city is a perfect cube. The angel John sees even measures it to assure John of that: It's 12,000 stadia wide, high, and long. And that brings us to the size of this city. 12,000 stadia is like 1400 miles. Can you imagine a city with walls 1400 miles high? And each is 144 cubits thick – that's the length of a football field.

But what stands out most is its beauty. The massive walls are made of a precious stone called **jasper**. The city is made of pure gold, so pure it's transparent – **clear as crystal**. Even the streets are paved in it. It has **twelve gates**, three on each side, and each one is made from one giant **pearl**. It has **twelve foundations**, and each one is decked out with a different kind of precious gem.

You might be thinking: "Wow. That's what heaven will be like." But did you notice? Jesus isn't showing John what heaven will be like here. He's showing John what *we'll* be like in heaven. This city isn't really a city. The angel says, "**Come, I will show you the wife, the bride of the Lamb.**" That's all believers – the Church with a capital "c." More proof of that is: Did you notice how many times the number 12 shows up here? 12 foundations. 12 gates. 12,000 stadia. 12 is the number of God's people. This perfectly beautiful city represents all God's people, the Church, made perfectly beautiful forever.

It must have been a refreshing sight for John. Because the church as he saw it was far from perfect. I mentioned a couple of the problems the church then faced – persecution and false teaching. And those haven't gone away - Christians here and around the world are still persecuted. False teachings have only multiplied.

But there were other problems in churches then, too. At the beginning of this book, John wrote a message from Jesus to seven of those churches. And they were messes: Some were tolerating false teaching. Others were tolerating immoral living. One had Christians who had become lukewarm in their faith and were about to lose it; another had members who cared more about their money than their faith.

But have things changed? If we're honest, don't we find such problems in our church, too? Members no longer coming, in danger of losing their faith. A luke-warm attitude toward God's Word – the way we often hear it with a yawn or skip bible study without a thought. Valuing earthly things more than our relationship with God. Tolerating immorality, if not in our midst, in our hearts and on TV screens. Friction caused by loveless words, slowness to forgive that leads to division, gossip that drives people away.

Are you starting to understand? What's wrong with the church isn't just persecution and false teaching. It's us. We are problems in the church. We don't love God and each other as we ought. We fall prey to Satan's temptations. We are anything but beautiful.

Which makes the love in these words all the more amazing: "**Come,**" the angel said. "**I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.**" God looked at the mess we are and he still loved us. He loved us and chose us to be his bride, his people, his city. You get a good idea of how great his love is in the building materials John saw – pure gold, pearls, precious gems. How much would it cost to construct a city so beautiful? Except it's not a city; it's us. How much did it cost in order to make us so beautiful? It cost Jesus everything. He left heaven and came to earth. He lived every moment perfectly in your place to cover you with his holiness, your wedding garment. He made all the ugliness of your sin his own, along with the punishment you deserved, on the cross – taking it away. He shed his holy, precious blood to wash away your sins and make you holy and precious, too.

You are. We might see problems when we look at the church and look in the mirror. But through faith in Jesus, Jesus no longer does. He sees his bride, made perfectly beautiful by his work. He sees his Holy City, the New Jerusalem – more precious in his eyes than all the gold and gemstones in the world. And soon, the bridegroom will return for us and bring us to our eternal home where we will live as John describes here.

The city is **as wide and long as it is high** – a perfect cube. Sin has made us crooked; but there, God will make us perfectly straight again. He will remake us in the wonderful dimensions he always intended for us. John describes us as **shining with God’s glory** – we’ll finally be that perfect reflection of God’s goodness and holiness he created us to be. We will be unable to sin, ever again. The city is made of **gold as pure as glass** – there will be no imperfection, no hint of anything sinful, about us. We will love God with all of our hearts and love our neighbor perfectly, too.

John also describes your security there. A comedian once joked, “What kind of a neighborhood will heaven be in if it needs walls and gates?” But he’s misunderstanding the picture language of Revelation. In ancient times, walls and gates kept people safe. So walls 1400 miles high, as thick as a football field? Gates with angel guards? This is God’s way of showing you that you will be perfectly safe in heaven. No one will persecute you. The devil will never tempt you. There will be no false teachings. There will be no more danger, physical or spiritual...nothing to worry you ever again.

But even now you are secure. That’s because of the **foundation** John saw the Church resting on. John says there are 12 of them, each one made of a different precious stone. And **on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb**. That’s not to say the Church stands on these 12 men; they were sinners in need of saving like us, and wouldn’t make for much of a foundation! But the Jesus they proclaimed? He is 100% reliable. The precious truths of God’s Word they wrote? Those will never fail.

And here God puts to rest our worries about the church’s future. We wonder what might happen if Pastor takes a call. But...did you notice? Pastor Degner is not the Church’s foundation nor this church’s foundation. That foundation is Jesus Christ and it will never fail. We worry about the future of the WELS. But no synod or organization is the church’s foundation. Those come and go, but the truths of God’s Word will stand forever. Our trust rests not on people or institutions but Christ’s rock-solid work and unfailing promises. And so our future, in this world and the next, is secure.

John notices one final aspect of our beautiful life there: **I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple**. The temple was where people in John’s day came into God’s presence. They couldn’t see him, but he promised he was there. He hid his glory so that sinful human beings could be assured of his forgiveness and enjoy fellowship with him. Today, God comes to us through word and sacrament. We don’t see him, but he promises us he’s there, hiding his glory in those means to assure us of forgiveness and fellowship with us.

But in the New Jerusalem, there will be no more place or means where God draws near to us. He will always be near us. And not in a hidden way – since we will be made perfectly beautiful and sinless, we will finally be able to bask in the full glory of God’s presence. John says: **The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp**. Or, as Paul put it: “Now, we see dimly, as in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face.” We will finally enjoy perfect, unobstructed fellowship with our Creator.

“Because I live,” Jesus told his disciples, “You also will live.” And Revelation 21 makes clear what kind of life Jesus won for us by dying and rising again: A life lived in perfect beauty in eternity. Don’t

Christ the Lord Lutheran Church

Pastor Degner

Fifth Sunday after Easter

Revelation 21:9-24

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“Your Eternal Future: The Church Made Perfectly Beautiful”

worry about the church’s future; it’s safe in the hands of our triumphant Savior. Instead, long for it. And since it’s certain, strive to live it already now. Since there we will be sinless, let’s strive to leave sin behind already now. Since there we will love God and each other perfectly, let’s strive to grow in and practice that love already now. Since there we will enjoy perfect fellowship with God, let’s be eager to fellowship with him now in Word and Sacrament until we see him face to face. Amen.