

Homiletics Analysis: Revelation 21:1–27

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Revelation 21 opens with the climactic vision of cosmic renewal: a new heaven and a new earth replacing the first creation, which has passed away, and the sea — symbol of chaos, threat, and separation throughout Revelation — existing no more. The Holy City, New Jerusalem, descends from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. A loud voice from the throne announces the revolutionary reality of the new order: God's dwelling (*skēnē*, tabernacle) is now with humanity, He will dwell with them, they will be His people, and He Himself will be their God. Every tear, death, mourning, crying, and pain belongs to the former order that has passed away. God speaks directly — one of only two divine speeches in the book — declaring: "Behold, I am making all things new." He commands John to write, for "these words are trustworthy and true." He identifies Himself as the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, and promises free water from the spring of life to the thirsty. The overcomer will inherit all this; God will be his God and he will be God's son. The cowardly, faithless, and those given to wickedness are consigned to the second death.

The second movement (vv. 9–27) shifts from proclamation to architectural vision. One of the seven bowl angels takes John to a high mountain and shows him the Holy City descending from heaven. What follows is a meticulous description of its dimensions, materials, and character — twelve gates inscribed with the names of Israel's tribes, twelve foundation stones bearing the apostles' names, a city of perfect cubic proportions (echoing the Holy of Holies), walls of jasper, streets of pure gold like transparent glass, foundation stones adorned with every jewel. There is no temple — for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. There is no sun or moon — for God's glory illuminates it and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations walk by its light; the kings of the earth bring their glory into it. Its gates are never shut. Nothing unclean will ever enter — only those written in the Lamb's book of life.

This Text — Intent:

God's intent through Revelation 21 is to anchor the persecuted, wavering, and world-weary reader in the certainty and splendor of the final destination — so completely and concretely that present suffering, the seductive pull of Babylon, and the terror of the beast lose their power to determine the reader's allegiance. This is not merely a doctrinal statement about eschatology. It is a vision designed to reorient desire, fortify endurance, and expose the poverty of every competing offer. The God who says "I am making all things new" is not offering a renovation of the present order — He is announcing a total

transformation, inviting the thirsty to come, and declaring that those who overcome will inherit it all. The intent is that the reader would see clearly enough to hold on — to refuse the compromises Revelation has been exposing since chapter 2, and to do so because what is coming is so magnificent and so certain that Babylon’s pleasures and the beast’s threats look like nothing by comparison.

Subject Sentence: The new creation arrives — God dwelling with His people forever, all things made new.

Primary Claim: God is showing His suffering, tempted people the full splendor of what He has prepared for them — so that they would see it clearly enough to count everything else as loss, endure everything Babylon threatens, and come thirsty to the one who gives freely.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the new creation — renewal or replacement?

A significant interpretive debate concerns whether “the first earth passed away” (v. 1) describes the annihilation and replacement of the present cosmos or its radical transformation and renewal. Dispensationalists and some Reformed interpreters (following 2 Peter 3:10’s language of elements “dissolving”) read this as total replacement — a brand new creation *ex nihilo* replacing the destroyed first creation. A second Reformed stream (N.T. Wright, Meredith Kline, and many covenant theologians) reads the language of “new” (*kainos* — qualitatively new, renewed, rather than *neos* — temporally new and different) as pointing to the redemption and transformation of the present creation, consistent with Romans 8:19–23’s imagery of creation groaning for *liberation*, not elimination. The continuity markers in the vision support the renewal reading: the New Jerusalem descends *to* earth rather than replacing earth with a heavenly realm; the nations and kings bring their glory *into* the city; there is agricultural life flowing from chapter 22. The Reformed reading that best accounts for the whole canonical witness holds that the new creation involves a radical discontinuity (the removal of everything corrupted by sin and death) alongside genuine continuity (this creation redeemed, not discarded) — analogous to the resurrection body, which is the same person raised and transformed, not a different person. The exposition should not overstate the annihilationist reading, as it risks implying that God ultimately abandons His original creation project rather than completing and perfecting it.

The Holy City as literal geography versus symbol of the people of God:

Some interpreters read the New Jerusalem as a literal future city with precise physical measurements — a cube of 1,400 miles on each side sitting on the renewed earth.

Dispensationalist readings often press this literalism. The Reformed and canonical reading notes that the city is described in terms that evoke the Holy of Holies (the perfect cube of 1 Kings 6:20) — meaning that the entire city has become what only the innermost sanctuary was: the place of God’s immediate presence. The measurements communicate theological completeness and perfection, not architectural blueprints. The bridal imagery (the city as “bride adorned for her husband,” echoing v. 2 and v. 9) confirms that the city *represents* the people of God in their glorified, covenant-complete relationship with God — not a structure separate from them. The Reformed reading holds both: there is a real, material new creation and a real city, but its description is structured by theological symbolism designed to communicate the fullness of God’s presence, the completeness of redemption, and the glory of the covenant people — not to function as an engineering diagram.

The nations and kings in the new creation — universalism or covenant breadth?

Verses 24–26 describe “the nations” walking by the city’s light and “the kings of the earth” bringing their glory into it — language that has led some universalists (including some open theists and liberal Protestant interpreters) to read Revelation 21 as implying universal salvation, or at minimum the ultimate inclusion of those who seemed excluded. This reading cannot be sustained against the text’s own internal structure: verse 27 immediately qualifies that nothing unclean enters — only those written in the Lamb’s book of life. The “nations” and “kings” language draws on Isaiah 60’s vision of the Gentile nations streaming to Zion — the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant promise that all nations would be blessed through Abraham’s seed. This is covenant breadth — the scope of redemption reaching every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (as the book has stated since Revelation 5:9–10) — not universalism. The gates-never-shut imagery communicates the permanent welcome and accessibility of the new creation to all who belong to the Lamb, not the eventual inclusion of those who refused Him.

The temple’s absence — fulfillment or discontinuity?

Verse 22’s declaration — “I saw no temple in it, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” — is sometimes read as a surprising discontinuity with Old Testament hope (which often envisions a rebuilt temple, as in Ezekiel 40–48). The Reformed reading holds that this is not discontinuity but fulfillment: every temple in redemptive history was a *type* pointing toward the reality of God’s immediate presence with His people. The tabernacle, Solomon’s temple, Ezra’s rebuilt temple, Ezekiel’s visionary temple — all were sacramental structures mediating the presence of a God whose people could not yet bear unmediated access. The new creation requires no mediating structure because the mediation is complete — God and the Lamb are themselves the temple. This is the telos of the whole temple-presence-dwelling theme running from Eden through Exodus through Ezekiel through John 1:14 to here. Ezekiel’s temple vision (chs. 40–48) is best read as a symbolic representation of restored covenant presence, not a literal blueprint contradicted by Revelation 21.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 1–2** — The new creation deliberately echoes and surpasses Eden: the garden becomes a city, the river of life flows again, and the presence of God — unmediated — is restored. What was lost in Genesis 3 is not merely restored but brought to its eschatological completion.
- **Isaiah 60:1–22; 65:17–25** — The direct Old Testament source for John’s vision: nations walking by God’s light, kings bringing their glory, no more weeping, the former things not remembered. Revelation 21 announces the fulfillment of Isaiah’s new creation hope in the person of the Lamb.
- **Ezekiel 37:27; 48:35** — “My dwelling place will be with them... and the name of the city from that time on will be: *The LORD is there*.” Revelation 21:3 quotes Ezekiel’s covenant formula directly; the city whose name is “The LORD is there” has arrived.
- **John 14:1–3** — Christ’s promise to prepare a place and return for His own points forward to this chapter; the dwelling (*monē*) Christ prepares is realized in the city where God tabernacles with His people.
- **Romans 8:18–25** — Paul’s vision of creation’s liberation from bondage to corruption grounds the theology of the new creation: the whole created order groans for the redemption that Revelation 21 announces as accomplished, confirming continuity-in-transformation rather than abandonment.

Aim: To cause the reader to see the new creation so vividly and certainly that present suffering is reframed, present temptations are exposed as poverty, and present thirst drives them to the one who gives freely.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
21:1	New heaven and new earth; the first heaven and earth passed away; the sea is no more	<i>Kainos</i> (qualitatively new); sea = chaos/threat/separation throughout Revelation; cf. Isaiah 65:17
21:2	Holy City, New Jerusalem, descending from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband	Bridal imagery connects to 19:7–9 and 21:9; city = covenant people in glorified state; descent = gift, not achievement

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21:3	Loud voice from the throne: God's tabernacle (<i>skēnē</i>) is with humanity; He will dwell with them; they will be His people; He will be their God	Direct quotation of covenant formula (Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 37:27); <i>skēnē</i> echoes John 1:14 (<i>eskēnōsen</i>); three-part covenant formula reaches consummation
21:4	God will wipe every tear; death, mourning, crying, pain will exist no more; former things have passed away	Not merely comfort — ontological transformation; these belong to the old order, not the new
21:5a	God speaks: "Behold, I am making all things new"	One of only two direct divine speeches in Revelation; present participle — renewal already in motion
21:5b	"Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true"	Explicit authorization of John's writing; connects to 1:11, 19; the vision's reliability underscored for the struggling churches
21:6a	"It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."	Declaration of completion; divine self-identification brackets all of history within God's sovereign purpose
21:6b	Free gift of water from the spring of the water of life to the thirsty	Echoes Isaiah 55:1; John 4:10–14; 7:37–39; invitation to present thirst, not only future arrival
21:7	The overcomer will inherit all this; God will be his God and he will be God's son	Inheritance language ties to covenant sonship; "overcomer" = the one who endures faithfully (cf. chs. 2–3)
21:8	The cowardly, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, liars — second death in the lake of fire	Sharp contrast with v. 7; "cowardly" (<i>deilois</i>) first in the list — the primary danger for Revelation's audience is capitulation, not defection to overt wickedness
21:9	One of the seven bowl	Deliberate echo of 17:1

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	angels: “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb”	(“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute”) — the two cities are set in explicit contrast
21:10	Carried in the Spirit to a great, high mountain; shown the Holy City descending from heaven	High mountain = prophetic vantage point (cf. Ezek. 40:2); Spirit-carried vision = reliable prophetic revelation
21:11	The city has the glory of God; radiance like a rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal	Glory (<i>doxa</i>) as the city’s characteristic quality — what the tabernacle and temple mediated partially, the city possesses fully
21:12–13	Great high wall; twelve gates; twelve angels at the gates; names of the twelve tribes of Israel on the gates; gates on all four sides	Israel’s continuity into the new creation; access from all directions = universal welcome; gates never shut (v. 25)
21:14	Wall has twelve foundations with the twelve apostles’ names	Israel and the apostles = Old and New Testament foundations of the covenant community; the church’s foundation in apostolic witness confirmed eschatologically
21:15–17	Angel measures the city with a golden rod: 12,000 stadia on each side, 144 cubits for the wall; the city is a perfect cube	12,000 = $12 \times 1,000$ (completeness $\times$ multitude); cube = Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:20); entire city is the Most Holy Place — unmediated divine presence everywhere
21:18–21	Materials: jasper walls, pure gold streets (like transparent glass), foundation stones adorned with twelve precious gems, pearl gates	Jewels echo high priestly breastplate (Exod. 28:17–20); Eden’s precious materials (Gen. 2:11–12) surpassed; beauty communicates glory, not luxury for its own sake
21:22	No temple — the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are	Temple typology reaches fulfillment; no mediating

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	its temple	structure needed when God and the Lamb are immediately present
21:23	No sun or moon — God's glory illuminates it; the Lamb is its lamp	Fulfills Isaiah 60:19–20; the created light-bearers are surpassed by the uncreated Light; cf. John 1:4–9; 8:12
21:24–26	Nations walk by its light; kings of the earth bring their glory into it; gates never shut; glory of nations brought in	Isaiah 60:3, 5, 11 fulfilled; covenant breadth — all nations redeemed through the Lamb; permanent open access
21:27	Nothing unclean will ever enter; no one who practices abomination or falsehood — only those written in the Lamb's book of life	Excludes what v. 8 listed; the book of life is the criterion (cf. 20:12, 15); qualifies vv. 24–26 against universalist readings

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	21:1–2	The New Order Arrives: Heaven, Earth, and the Bride Descend
2	21:3–4	The Covenant Fulfilled: God Dwells With His People, Death Is Ended
3	21:5–8	God Speaks: All Things New, Free Gift for the Thirsty, Warning for the Faithless
4	21:9–14	The City Described: Its Identity, Its Access, Its Foundations
5	21:15–21	The City Measured: Its Dimensions and Its Glory
6	21:22–27	The City's Character: No Temple, No Sun, Open to the Nations, Closed to the Unclean

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The new creation arrives — God dwelling with His people forever, all things made new.

Primary Claim: God is showing His suffering, tempted people the full splendor of what He has prepared for them — so that they would see it clearly enough to count everything else as loss, endure everything Babylon threatens, and come thirsty to the one who gives freely.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe your suffering by the final destination, not the present pain. (*Mind/belief*)

Revelation 21 is not given to Christians in comfort — it is given to Christians under pressure, facing economic exclusion, social shame, and the constant seduction of Babylon's pleasures. The vision's entire design is reorientation: God shows John *the end* so that the middle stops feeling like the whole story. Every reader who is in pain, grieving, diminished, or exhausted by the long faithfulness required of them is being shown: the former things will pass away. Not managed, not improved — passed away. Death itself is ended. The tears God wipes away are real tears — which means the comfort is real comfort, not a spiritual platitude. To receive this vision rightly is to stop evaluating your present circumstances as though they constitute the final verdict on whether God is good or whether faithfulness is worth it.

2. Let the splendor of the new creation reorder your desires away from what Babylon is offering. (*Affections/worship*)

The city's beauty in Revelation 21 is not incidental decoration — it is apologetic. God describes jasper walls and pearl gates and streets of gold like transparent glass because He is making a case that what He has prepared makes everything the world offers look like a cheap imitation. The reader who is tempted to compromise — to burn the pinch of incense, to quietly go along with the imperial cult, to let Babylon have their allegiance in exchange for comfort and belonging — is being shown what they would be trading away. This is not mere moralism (“don't love the world”). It is a vision designed to produce a specific affective response: a longing for the city that makes Babylon look like a slum. Ask yourself honestly which city currently looks more attractive to you — and let the answer diagnose where your heart actually lives.

3. Hear the present-tense invitation in verse 6 as addressed to you now, not only then.

(*Will/behavior*) “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.”

The verb is future, but the condition — *thirst* — is present. God is not calling the satisfied; He is calling the thirsty. This is an invitation directed at present need, not only a promise about future arrival. The person reading Revelation 21 who is spiritually dry, who has been going through the motions of faith without drinking deeply, who has been trying to satisfy their thirst with what Babylon carries — that person is being directly addressed. Come. The spring is free. Stop paying for water that doesn't satisfy (Isaiah 55:1–2) and come to the one

who gives without cost. This is not an altar call tacked onto an eschatological vision — it is the vision’s own logic: the God who will give freely then is giving freely now.

4. Take courage from the identity of the one who says “these words are trustworthy and true.” (*Mind/belief*) Verse 5 is not a general claim about Scripture’s reliability. It is the Alpha and Omega — the one who holds the beginning and the end within His own identity — commanding John to write because what is being said can be trusted absolutely. The churches in Revelation were not struggling primarily with intellectual doubt about heaven’s existence; they were struggling with whether it was *worth it* to hold on when Babylon was present and the new creation was not. The answer God gives is not an argument — it is a name: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End*. The one making this promise cannot be overtaken by history, cannot be outmaneuvered by Rome or any empire, cannot fail to deliver what He has declared. The overcomer’s confidence is not optimism about how things will work out — it is a settled conviction about *who* has made the promise.

5. Examine whether “cowardly” describes your present posture, and repent of the slow drift toward compromise. (*Will/behavior*) Verse 8 places “the cowardly” (*deilois*) first in the list of those who inherit the second death — before murderers, idolaters, and liars. This is not accidental. The primary spiritual danger Revelation addresses throughout is not dramatic apostasy but the slow, fear-driven drift toward accommodation: the person who doesn’t openly renounce Christ but quietly stops holding the line, who lets social pressure determine which convictions they voice, who chooses comfort over faithfulness in a thousand small decisions. The word translated “cowardly” describes the person who retreats under pressure — who calculates that the cost of faithfulness is too high and gradually makes terms with Babylon. If that description touches something real, Revelation 21’s vision is the corrective: look at what God is bringing, and then decide whether the fear that has been governing your choices is proportionate to the reality being shown to you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Revelation 21 constitutes one of Scripture’s fullest and most concrete disclosures of the nature, scope, and character of eschatological redemption. It establishes that redemption is not evacuation from creation but the renewal and consummation of creation — God does not ultimately abandon His original project but brings it to its telos. The passage reveals God as the one who personally dwells with His people without mediation, who personally wipes every tear, who personally speaks the declaration “I am making all things new.” The covenant formula of verse 3 — “He will be their God and they will be His people” — reaches its final, unqualified fulfillment: every prior covenant administration was moving toward this, and every prior experience of God’s presence was a foretaste of this. The Lamb’s centrality in the city’s temple and light

confirms that the consummation of all things is inseparable from the person and work of Christ — eschatology is not a supplement to Christology but its final expression.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Revelation 21 presses the Reformed understanding of grace, covenant, and the gospel to its eschatological horizon. The city descends — it is not built, achieved, or ascended to. Grace characterizes the new creation from its first moment: the spring of life is given “without payment” (*dōrean*), echoing the entire biblical logic of salvation as unearned gift. The covenant formula (v. 3) confirms that what Reformed theology has traced through the covenant of grace from Genesis 3:15 through every redemptive-historical administration has not been an evolving series of contracts but a single, unfolding commitment reaching its irreversible completion. The absence of the temple (v. 22) is the Reformed reading of typology brought to its conclusion: every sacrificial system, every mediating structure, every sacramental institution was always pointing beyond itself to the reality of immediate divine presence secured through the Lamb. The warning of verse 8 — with “cowardly” at the head — confronts the perennial Reformed pastoral challenge: assurance must never become presumption, and perseverance is not automatic but is the Spirit-sustained fruit of genuine faith that holds on through every pressure Babylon can bring.

Main Takeaway

God is showing you the end — not to satisfy theological curiosity but to hold you together through everything between here and there. The new creation is coming: God Himself dwelling with you, every tear wiped, death abolished, all things made new, and the whole city lit by the glory of the Lamb. That is what you are holding on for. And if you’re thirsty right now — if the journey has cost more than you expected and you’re running dry — the same God who will give you the city gives you water today, freely, without cost. Come to Him. Count Babylon’s offers for what they are. Hold the line.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Revelation 21 as an eschatological data set rather than a pastoral vision.** The most common failure with this chapter is to preach it as a doctrinal lecture about what heaven will be like — addressing questions the text does not raise (Will we recognize each other? What will we do all day?) while missing the question the text is actually answering (Is it worth holding on?). Revelation 21 is given to suffering churches, not curious theologians. The exposition must let the

text do its pastoral work — confronting and reorienting the person who is tempted to let go.

- **Misreading “all things new” as indifference to the present created order.** Some preaching implies that because everything will be made new, the present creation — and by extension, cultural engagement, embodied life, and earthly relationships — is simply disposable. This contradicts the text’s own imagery (the new creation is *this* creation renewed, not replaced; the nations bring their glory *into* it) and produces a theology of withdrawal rather than faithful cultural engagement. The exposition should clarify the continuity-in-transformation that the new creation involves.
- **Using the gates-never-shut imagery (v. 25) to suggest universal salvation.** The text itself immediately forecloses this reading in verse 27: nothing unclean enters — only those in the Lamb’s book of life. Preaching that lingers on the open gates without the qualifier of verse 27 produces a false impression about the inclusivity of the new creation. Handle both verses together and let the book-of-life criterion do its proper gatekeeping work in the exposition.
- **Preaching the city’s beauty as an end in itself — Christian materialism dressed in eschatological clothing.** The precious gems, gold streets, and architectural splendor exist in the text to communicate theological realities (the Holy of Holies, the priestly breastplate, the surpassing of created light) — not to appeal to consumer desire for upgraded housing. An exposition that dwells on the city’s luxury without connecting it to its theological referents risks producing a prosperity-gospel adjacent vision of heaven as the ultimate reward for good behavior.
- **Failing to preach the warning of verse 8 in context.** The passage’s comfort and the passage’s warning belong together — verse 7 (the overcomer inherits all this) and verse 8 (the cowardly face the second death) are a single unit. Preachers who suppress verse 8 to keep the sermon warm and encouraging are cutting out the pastoral nerve the text is pressing. Equally, preachers who treat verse 8’s list as an opportunity to address external moral failures miss that “cowardly” (*deilois*) stands first — the primary danger is the fear-driven drift toward compromise, not spectacular defection.
- **Abstracting the invitation of verse 6 from its context.** “Come to the waters” is one of Scripture’s great invitations and is sometimes preached as a free-floating gospel appeal disconnected from the vision that generates it. The power of the invitation in verse 6 is precisely that it comes from the Alpha and Omega — the one who has just declared the completion of all things — and that it is addressed to the *thirsty*, meaning those whose experience of the present order has left them depleted. Preach the invitation in its context: this is the God of the new creation extending the new creation’s abundance into the present moment for those whose journey has cost them deeply.