

# Opening Ceremonies

Heaven on Earth – Part V

Revelation 21:22-27

## Introduction

While John the Apostle was exiled by the Roman Emperor to the island of Patmos, he was given one of the most comprehensive reviews of future events ever delivered by God to and through a human being. John would write of such breathtaking scenes taking place on earth and in heaven that to this day, skeptics abound and his words are either dismissed or ignored.

John writes of the final contests between the dragon and the Lamb, between sin and the Savior, between the armies of darkness and the forces of light. He uses terms of conquest, victory, judgment, wrath, reward, an eternal hell and an eternal heaven.

In chapter 21 of John's Revelation, he introduces us to the opening ceremony, as it were, of the eternal state. He speaks of this magnificent heavenly city of God – the Father's house – built with gold and bathed in light.

For more than seven hundred years before John wrote this book of Revelation, the Greek civilization hosted athletic contests every four years. At first these were primarily foot races, but later, other events were added, such as wrestling, the javelin throw, and the long jump.

These contests were originally held in the western region of Greece at the temple in Olympia, and the first documented events revealed the games were dedicated to Zeus, their chief god. The contests in Olympia continued over the centuries and began to include other nations.

The modern world now calls this competition the Olympic Games. The first modern Olympic contests were held in 1896, and included athletes from fourteen countries competing in forty-three events.

The tradition expanded every four years to include more cooperation among nations and ceremony. In 1908, the Olympic Games were held in London and began with the first Opening Ceremony.

By the way, with the World Cup just around the corner, I found it interesting that soccer – or "football" to most of the world – was not originally allowed to be included in the Olympics due to restrictions against professional athletes. As a result

of being barred from the games, the Federation International Football Association (FIFA) began their own World Cup in 1930, and it is also held every four years.

The world loves all of these games. To put it into perspective, a little more than one hundred million people watched the last Super Bowl, a little more than one billion people watched the last World Cup, and just over four billion people watched the last Summer Olympics. To this day, the Olympic Games are the most watched sporting event in the world. Because of this, it has become the platform for national pride and for a display of national sophistication and wealth – especially for the country that hosts the Olympics.

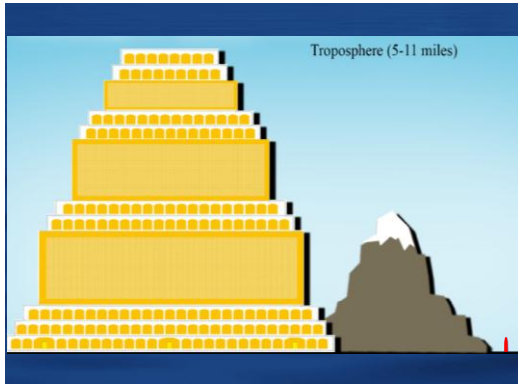
It was not always a show. However, the bar was raised significantly when the Winter Olympic Games were held in California in 1960. The Head of Pageantry was a man by the name of Walt Disney. Through his creativity, the opening day ceremony had an extra measure of drama and extravagance. There were high school choirs and high school bands, ice statues and firework displays; at one point, thousands of balloons and two thousand white doves were released into the air. For the big finale, all the participating nation's flags were dropped out of airplanes circling overhead and they unfurled as they parachuted down.

One thing is obvious today – every Olympics host nation seeks to outdo the other in the Opening Ceremony. Today, it costs some nations an estimated one hundred million dollars for the Opening Ceremony alone.

Turn in your Bible to the last paragraph of Revelation chapter 21, where we have nothing less than the Opening Ceremony of the eternal state. In fact, as I read this paragraph again and again, it struck me that we see some wonderful parallels in this passage to an Olympic event in which more than half of the world's population tunes in.

There is the host city and a redefined Olympic torch; there is the parade of nations, a security release, and the Olympic motto redefined. And this Opening Ceremony makes everything else seem like child's play.

## The Host City



John has revealed the host city, whose cubed measurements, I believe, are given as a sum total of between 1300 and 1500 miles (Revelation 21:16). This measurement depends upon the length of a Greek “stadia,” of which no one is quite sure. This would mean the base of the Father’s house is about 11 miles in every direction, including its height.

Compared to the capital city of heaven, the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai, which is currently the tallest building in the world, is barely visible.

Even Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, seems small compared to the Father’s house, which stretches through the atmosphere to the troposphere.

By the way, the mention of twelve foundations (Revelation 21:14) fits perfectly with a pyramid-styled structure with each foundation or level rising 11 miles or more into the sky. We could think of them as floors in a skyscraper. These ascend higher and higher into the atmosphere until the top level is reached, where I believe the throne of God is located in all its brilliant glory.

Now keep in mind that in this city, each floor would be nearly a mile high. There could be cities within this city with hundreds of millions of people living on each level.

As we learned in our last session, the tallest building in the world today is the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai, but in the Father’s house, we could build one on top of the other inside this first floor.

This is a high ceiling! However, we will never have to change any light bulbs, so never fear.



One artist, by the name of Janet Willis, drew an interesting sketch of what is essentially the first floor of the Father’s house. It shows skyscraper after skyscraper on either side of the river of life. Some are taller than others, but all of them have a riverside view. It also gives an idea of how massive and accommodating one long block of this city can be.

The problem with a picture like this is that everyone who sees it and loves the city will think, “That’s magnificent.” However, others may say, “I lost my backyard. What happened to wide open spaces?!”

Keep in mind that we have been promised a dwelling place in the Father’s house (John 14:2). This Greek word that is translated “place” (τοπον), like an apartment, could be rendered “sanctuary or sacred space” in the Father’s house.<sup>i</sup>

I dug a little deeper and found that this word was also used by the Greeks to refer to a territory.

Frankly, we are not told how big or small our dwelling place is in the Father’s house. However, every one of us will have a residence there, as Christ promised.

Keep in mind that this does not mean we will not have a place or even places throughout the world, and perhaps beyond, where we will one day travel, explore, and enjoy as we glory in our creator God forever.

This is home base. This is the host city of the greatest kingdom ever described by God to mankind.

Now, the apostle John makes a special note of the absence of a particular feature as he moves us through the city gates and into the Golden City. Take a look at verse 22, where John writes,

***I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.***

The Old Testament prophets foresaw the temple as the principal item in their descriptions of the glorified city, such as Isaiah’s description in

chapter 44 and chapter 60, as well as Ezekiel's description in chapters 40-48.<sup>ii</sup>

The temple that John had expected to see from what he knew of Old Testament prophetic descriptions was actually the restored temple in the millennial kingdom, which is by this time over. It is as if John wants to make sure the reader understands that the prophetic description should not be misunderstood. The millennial kingdom has a temple, but the eternal state does not.

Why not? Because in the Father's house, God's presence will not be limited to a single building – some holy of holies tucked inside a temple somewhere.

Not here, for the presence of God will permeate the entire city.<sup>iii</sup>

There will never be a need to go to a sanctuary, a temple, a cathedral, a chapel or any other house of worship, for in heaven we will worship in the very presence of God. In the heavenly city, He Himself will be the place of worship.<sup>iv</sup>

The trouble is that we tend to think of worship as a song or a service on Sunday morning. The biblical concept of worship is far more comprehensive, and we will finally get it right in this place.

The biblical idea of worship incorporates all of life. Paul would write that even eating, drinking, whatever we do can be done to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31).

What Paul means is that anything we do that is necessary or legitimate in life can be considered an act of worship. This is impossible for us to grasp and practice in our sinful bodies and with our sinful propensities, but in the Father's house we are perfected in every aspect, sinless in every regard, glorified in every molecule of our being and our lives will literally become non-stop worship.<sup>v</sup>

What a host city this is; what a Creator, Redeemer! What a future this is for those who believe in Christ alone.

## The Eternal Flame

If you have watched the Opening Ceremonies of the Summer Olympics, you have probably been struck by the tradition of the Olympic Flame.

The Greeks believed that fire had been given to mankind by one of their gods, and they considered it to have sacred qualities. We know from history that the high priestess of Olympia would use a special curved mirror to focus the sun's rays to ignite a flame to burn perpetually in front of that Greek temple.

I found it interesting to learn from secular sources that the Olympic flame was believed to represent purity and the pursuit of perfection.

It was in 1928 that the tradition was first begun to actually go to the ruins of the same temple in Olympia and start the Olympic flame, which was to be kept burning until the games were over.

In 1936 a new tradition was created, called the Olympic Torch relay. The flame was lit at the temple ruins in Olympia by a woman wearing ancient styled robes, using a curved mirror to focus the light of the sun and create the flame. Then a special torch was lit and a long relay of runners carrying one torch after another brought the flame from Olympia to the site of the games.

If you can imagine, it took more than 3,000 runners to bring the flame through Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and several other countries before it reached Berlin, Germany, where the summer games were being held. It was actually the idea of Adolf Hitler, who planned to show that Germany had inherited the greatness of the ancient empire of Greece.

Hitler also planned to show the superiority of the German race to the rest of the world. He disappeared not long after the games, deeply angered when an African American named Jesse Owens beat every German he raced against. Is that not great?! Jesse went on to win four gold medals.

If you have watched the Olympic Torch relay, you know that being a torchbearer is considered a great honor. Typically it is given to celebrities and famous athletes, but also to local residents where the torch is passing through – local residents with a record of faithful service.

Who in this city of gold would be the greatest celebrity, the most faithful servant of all? John writes in verse 23,

***And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.***

Jesus Christ is pictured as someone not just bearing the lamp that burns eternally, but as that Someone who radiates the light of God's glory.

Jesus pulled back the shades one afternoon and let some of His glorious light spill down over Saul of Tarsus as he was heading for Damascus to persecute even more Christians. That ray of light emanating from the presence of the Lord knocked Saul to the ground. Saul, later known as Paul the Apostle, said,

***... "Who are you Lord?" ... (Acts 22:8a)***

Then we read,

*... And He said to me, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting." (Acts 22:8b)*

The city of glory will radiate light as bright as daylight. John writes in verse 25,

*... for there will be no night there . . .*

This will be true even when the earth's rotation carries the city away from the sun.<sup>vi</sup>

Keep in mind the earth, the solar system, and the universe will be recreated and perfected to last forever by the creative handiwork of Christ in this new creation.

You might be thinking, "But we're told there will be no sun or moon."

Look at verse 23 a little more carefully.

*And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.*

In other words, the glory of God will be uniquely displayed in this glorious city, and there will be no night there.

The city of God will be ablaze by the glory of God, mediated through the Lamb of God.

However, this does not mean that outside the city, throughout the new heavens and the new earth, the glory of God will not be uniquely diffused so that earth will continue to operate as God created it to. This includes the normal cycles and patterns of light and darkness, sunrise and sunset, evening and morning.

By the way, God created the day and night, evening and morning, darkness and light before sin entered the world, and He said,

*... It [is] very good . . . (Genesis 1:31)*

Passages such as Psalm 148 and Daniel 12 imply continuity between the old creation of Genesis 1 and the new creation of Revelation 21 that includes the animal kingdom, the sun and the moon, planets and stars, and a multitude of other created things we will enjoy forever.

## **The Procession of Nations**

In 1908, following another volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, the Olympic Games were moved from Rome to London. There, for the first time in Olympic history, the opening ceremony included all the athletes marching into the stadium behind their nation's flags. More than 2,000 competitors marched

into the arena with patriotism for their nation in their hearts.

I do not know about you, but every time I watch the Olympics and see the American flag and the athletes beginning to enter the arena representing my country, I get goose bumps. It is really moving to me to see a gold medalist standing on the victor's highest platform, while the national anthem of his or her country plays, with tears coming down their cheeks.

The next awesome sight in John's vision is of patriotism for the kingdom of God taking precedence. Notice verse 24.

*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.*

Skip to verse 26.

*and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it;*

There are some who believe these nations will continue from the millennium throughout the eternal state as immortalized humans who live on as nations and ethnic people groups.

I believe just the opposite is true.

John is telling us that national identities and patriotism are actually given back to the One who alones deserves all glory and praise.<sup>vii</sup>

People from every tongue, tribe, and nation will enter the eternal city, as it were, in a grand procession, becoming one nation under God.

As you may know, it is the desire of the Olympic tradition to instill the brotherhood of nations. The Olympic flag contains five interconnected rings, which symbolize the five original continents of the world represented in the games (with North and South America counted as one continent). They are interconnected to symbolize the friendship of the nations demonstrated by fair and friendly competition. The rings are blue, yellow, black, green and red – chosen because at least one of these colors appears on the flag of every country in the world.

However, as hard as the world tries, it cannot reach the unity of nations it has so long desired.

The barrier to this unity is not a race issue; it is not a color issue or a class issue; it is not an economic problem or a political problem – it is a spiritual problem that creates a heart problem.

We need a new heart. For those who have been redeemed and had their hearts cleansed – they, the church, can demonstrate unity regardless of race, class, color, or economic standing.

This happens in the church. Brothers and sisters of Christ's church live it out because they have come to realize that in Christ they are not many races trying to get along, but actually one race of the redeemed.

Jesus Christ did not come to get all the nations to act better toward each other; He came to gather up a new nation. He is coming to find a bride and He will find one made up of every tongue, tribe, and nation.

At this point in time, we live and love imperfectly, in shadowy form, but in our future heavenly state, our love and fellowship will be demonstrated in bright and perfect unity. This is the final and ultimate fulfillment of who we are as God's redeemed,

*[We] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that [we] may declare the praises of Him who has called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light;*

*. . . for . . . now [we] are the people of God . . .*

*(I Peter 2:9-10)*

The redeemed will one day process into the Father's house under the banner of a new flag – all equally significant, all equally laying down the glory of their past, as former diplomats walk side by side with former dirt farmers; as a former king links arms with a former custodian.

I know one custodian who will be there – the faithful custodian from East Cary Middle School who volunteered to open that school house for our church while we rented that space for several years. The band room was our sanctuary; the Home Economics room was our nursery; the rest of the rooms, including the mechanics shop, were our Sunday school rooms. We used to give that old custodian, who was near retirement, a Christmas gift every year for being willing to give up his Sunday morning. He was always kind and always gracious, even as our church grew and needed more and more rooms. He knew the Lord and he loved the church. He would often listen to the sermon from a back room, dressed in his old work clothes, preparing to sweep up after we left. One Sunday, between Sunday school and church, I found him in the back shop where I had gone to practice my sermon. Now I practice every Sunday at 8:00 o'clock! I talked to him a while and thanked him again for what he meant to us, and he said to me, "You know, Reverend, six days out of the week this place is a school, but on the Lord's Day, it's a church."

For the redeemed who loved Christ and His church – talk about a processional! What pageantry and what joy there will be.

So far we have learned from John's Revelation:

- Heaven is on earth and the Father's house – the heavenly city of gold – is situated on a newly created earth.
- There is a new creation, which will include everything God created in Genesis chapter 1.
- Eternity includes glorious music, as we have already heard sung in earlier chapters.
- Eternity includes the Father's house of gold and precious gems – which also reveals architecture, as well as light and design – and unity and fellowship among all of God's redeemed forever.

## Security Measures

Now you might be wondering, "Is there any way any of this could get messed up?"

At the last Olympics, a billion dollars was spent on security measures alone.

While the Olympic Games try their best to showcase the unity of the nations, I have read that the Olympic Committee for the 2012 Olympic Games in London are planning for the greatest number of security risks since the bombers of Berlin flew overhead in World War II. The Olympic Committee is effectively trying to get ready for as many terrorists as there will be athletes.

But can anything mess up this glorious event?

To make matters even more at risk, John writes in verse 25,

*. . . its gates will never be closed;*

How is *that* for security?

If this city were on the planet today, there would be people trying to figure out a way to peel some gold off the streets, or chip away at the gates of solid pearl.

And the gates are wide open.

This is just another way of saying the Father's house is entirely safe – from anything on the inside and anything on the outside.

A city in the ancient world opened its gates only if the threat of an attack did not exist. Even then it had to depend on its military scouts and the honesty of its soldiers.

When John writes that the gates are always open, it is one of the clearest ways he can communicate to

his generation that this city is without any threat to its survival.

This is true because God Himself is on the throne. It is not only true because of this, but because of the fact that every inhabitant has been changed.

Notice verse 27.

***and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.***

Sin and sinners have already been dealt with. The believers are confirmed in holiness in their glorified state. The sin nature has been eradicated from their glorified bodies.

John wrote earlier,

***. . . we will be like Him [Jesus Christ] (I John 3:2)***

So when John writes in verse 27,

***. . . nothing unclean . . .***

. . . will be a part of the eternal state – this means there will be nothing unclean in us.

In our glorified state we will be perfect. We will finally live without any sinful thought, selfish motives, sinful impulses or actions. This is what Paul wrote of as the final and eternal state of glorification in Romans chapter 8, verse 30.

Imagine – every aspect of our inner man will function in divine righteousness. Our minds will learn of God, submit to God, and love God with singular, undivided affection.<sup>viii</sup>

Our memories will remain; we will not forget who we are and who we were on earth. In fact, God intends for us to remember the names of the twelve apostles and the twelve sons of Jacob, and they remember who they are too. Evidently Jacob is still Jacob and Peter is still Peter, which means Susan and Tom, Stephen and Marsha, Jeff and Gwen, Robert and Cindy, and Leo and Nancy are still them.

However, they are not married anymore – no one say, “Amen.” Jesus cleared this matter up when He preached that we will be like the angels in this regard – neither married nor given in marriage (Matthew 22:30).

However, they will still remember, and whenever they see each other in the eternal state, along with believing children they have had, they will have greater and purer love for one another than ever before.

Just as Jesus Christ remembered and loved His disciples after He was resurrected and glorified, so we will love our brothers and sisters after we are glorified.

We will remember we attended worship services together. We will rejoice in what we have come through and where we now are.

We will be made holy. One author wrote that our perspectives will be perfected, our consciences will be free from all guilt, our appreciation for the atoning work of Christ will only grow throughout eternity, and we will forever enjoy living and serving with unrestricted freedom for the glory and pleasure of God as God originally designed and created us to live.<sup>ix</sup>

Unlike the first creation, this new creation will not have the potential of another Lucifer rebelling.<sup>x</sup>

There will be no potential for an Adam or Eve sinning, for we will all be made holy – confirmed forever without the potential of sinning ever again.

The only ones in the eternal state of heaven on earth are those who have gained their passport through the blood of Christ. John writes for the last time of names, in verse 27,

***. . . [of those redeemed] whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.***

Just as John began his revelation of heaven at the beginning of chapter 21 by telling us what would not be there – you may remember the “no mores”: no more death, no more mourning, crying, or pain – this chapter now ends the same way – no more sinful things entering the city, no more abomination workers, no more lying.

This is the city of God – and sinners will have been dealt with forever, except for all the sinners who have come to the cross of Christ and found in Him forgiveness; they are justified forever through Christ. (Romans 5:1).

One author wrote,

*Heaven is known for what it does not include: no funeral homes, no hospitals or abortion clinics; no divorce courts, brothels or bankruptcy courts; no psychiatric wards or drug rehab centers; no pornography, child abuse, rape or missing children; no racial tension, prejudice or drive-by shootings; no misunderstandings, injustice, or depression; no hurt feelings, emptiness or worry; no physical pain and no accidents; no heart monitors, no doctors, no nurses and no vegetables [okay I added that one]; no rust;*

*no false teachers; no hurricanes, bad habits and bankruptcies. We will never need to confess sin ever again. We will not need to apologize again; we will not need to resist Satan again and we will never have to resist temptation.*<sup>xi</sup>

Never, ever again!

In this final paragraph in chapter 21, John informs us:

- the heavenly city will be without any iniquity;
- our own lives will be without any impurity;
- our worship will be without any interruption.

What a future; what a promise; what an opening ceremony for those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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<sup>i</sup> Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume VIII, ed. by Gerhard Friedrich (Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), p. 189.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 474.

<sup>iii</sup> Kendell H. Easley, Holman New Testament Commentary: Revelation (Holman, 1998), p. 401.

<sup>iv</sup> John MacArthur, The Glory of Heaven (Crossway, 1996), p. 109.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>vi</sup> Henry M. Morris, The Revelation Record (Tyndale House, 1986), p. 459.

<sup>vii</sup> Grant R. Osborne, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation (Baker Academic, 2002), p. 763.

<sup>viii</sup> Stephen J. Lawson, Heaven Help Us (Navpress, 1995), p. 146.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, p. 147.

<sup>x</sup> Nathan M. Meyer, From Now to Eternity (BMH Books, 1976), p. 203.

<sup>xi</sup> Lawson, p. 149.