

12 Gates into the New Jerusalem

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD., June 2nd, 2019

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.... And she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel.... And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl” (Rev. 21:1-2, 12 & 21).

The vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation is often sadly misunderstood. In fact, it's very challenging to understand, since much of what is said about it simply doesn't work in any literal sense. Most people don't realize, for example, how big it was, as described: 12,000 furlongs square AND TALL – which translates to about 1500 miles, all of pure gold, which is soft and heavy, and so fine as to be “like clear glass.” Anything that big made of solid gold would tip the earth on its axis, never mind the fact that it would have no structural strength and that there's no breathable air beyond about 200 miles up.

Then again, the wall around it, we read, was “great and high,” but that was only 144 cubits, just over 200 feet, so in comparison with the city itself it would have been like a hairline of defense. Even so, a 6,000 mile wall (1500 miles per side) of jasper 200 feet tall is beyond earthly imagination. And city gates of single pearls? Imagine the oyster!

The point is not to ridicule the vision; far from it! Rather it is to show how obviously symbolic it ALL is – from the gold of the city to the precious stones in the foundations of the wall. Have you ever heard it said of a really good plan that it is “pure gold”? What about a concept that is “crystal clear”? Or a “gem” of an idea? The simple truth is, that vision makes no sense if we try to understand it literally, but it makes *perfect sense* when we recognize the symbolism in it.

Today we’re calling special attention to the pearly gates – and to the fact that there were 12 of them, three on each of the four sides. And we’re noticing that there’s a connection between these 12 gates and the 12 tribes of Israel, the names of the tribes being written on the gates, and that the names of the 12 apostles also appeared on the foundations beneath them. We don’t have enough information to explore these connections in detail, but we can see the general relationship – in a moment.

First, though, what does a gate – or a door – represent? Of course it’s a way in. And since Jerusalem (old or new) represents the church, the 12 gates into it represent the 12 different ways we can enter into the church: from the east, west, south or north. But remember, each gate is of a single pearl, and that pearl, obviously a pearl of VERY GREAT price, is the acknowledgment of the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. So while it can be fun and interesting to try to picture a gate made of a single pearl (Would it be a flat pearl, as opposed to spherical? Would it be hinged or somehow lifted up to provide entrance? And if the gates were never shut, as it says in verse 23, how would they have been positioned in the wall?), none of this speculation is necessary if we simply “get” the fact that it is all symbolic.

Still, one possible way to visualize it is as a sort of holographic or

“virtual” pearl, a pearl of such ephemeral substance that one could walk right *through* it, as if through a passageway of iridescent light. Somehow this seems easier to comprehend, though of course it requires us to set aside the physical characteristics of a pearl. Then again, that’s the nature of the whole spiritual world: physical things do not exist there as such, but what they represent do, and the reality of these spiritual things *appears* just as it did in this world – at least from a distance – just like the world of computer generated “virtual reality.”

Anyway, back to the symbolism of the gates. It is of course no coincidence that there were 12 of them in this vision, 12 representing fullness and completeness, while also indicating the variety of different approaches there can be to a spiritual life. For example, the three gates on the east side of the city represent all the different ways of entering through a strong, clear and penetrating love to the Lord, like the heat in the light of the rising sun, and the three gates on the west all the different ways of entering through love that is not so intense, as represented in the setting sun. As for the gates on the south and north, our reference point is of course the land of Israel, which is in the northern hemisphere, and so the greatest light from the sun is in the southern sky, while the lesser light is in the north. Light corresponds to truth, and thus enlightenment *in* the truth, so those entering from the south enter with greater wisdom and understanding, while those entering from the north do so with less understanding, but still with special appreciation for the light.

In general, then, we have people who enter the heavenly life with more – or less – love to the Lord, and with more – or less – understanding of His Word. We could think of the east-west people as the right-brainers or the more affectionate people, and the south-north people as the left-brainers or more intellectual types, as most of us lean more toward one side or the other. But the important point is that ALL who acknowledge the Divinity of the Lord find

their way in and they all experience the beauty and wonder of the heavenly city when they live according to His commandments.

And because names signify qualities, the fact that the names of the 12 tribes of the children of Israel were written or inscribed at the gates tells us that the qualities represented by the gates include all those represented by the tribes. Now you may not have been here for the sermon on the 12 sons of Israel, but they are easily classified in three groups of four. And the first four, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, can easily be identified with one of the gates in one of those walls. Reuben stands for faith but a fairly weak, very early stage of faith, so we can associate him with one of the gates in the northern wall. Simeon stands for obedience, which is a state of faith in the will, and so can be associated with one of the gates in the southern wall. Remember, north and south have to do with light, truth or understanding

Levi represents charity toward the neighbor, a basic spiritual love that can be identified with one of the gates in the western wall, and Judah represents a deeper, celestial love for the Lord Himself that clearly belongs in the eastern wall. Again, remember, east and west have to do with heat, love or states of the will.¹

The second set of 4 of the sons of Israel in a sense repeats the cycle, as Dan represents acknowledgment or affirmation of the truth, leading to good judgment, which is what his name means. Naphtali represents temptation, from a name that means “to wrestle.” These again are states of faith or the understanding and so can be identified with gates on the northern and southern walls of the city. But Gad represents good works and Asher a more internal blessedness or happiness, both of which are states of the will and so may be as-

¹ Ezekiel 48:30-34 assigns the tribes' names to gates on *other* walls, suggesting a need for further, deeper study. The assignments here are derived from doctrine illustrating very general principles.

signed to the eastern and western gates, Gad to the west and Asher to the east.

Finally, we're taught in the *Arcana* that the last four sons of Israel stand for the resulting states of conjunction of goodness and truth, again progressing from a relatively external level of conjunction, as in the application of conscience, to a deeper, more internal level as in the perception of truth that arises from the inner experience of living well. So we may have Issachar written at one of the gates in the northern wall, Zebulon at one of the southern wall, Joseph at one of the western wall, and Benjamin, the last, at the main gate in the eastern wall.

Now of course this is all somewhat speculative, since the names are not laid out this way specifically in the book of Revelation, but it works. And a very similar thing could be said about the names of the 12 apostles, which were said to be written on the 12 foundation stones of the city. The POINT is that all of these names signify various degrees and qualities of spiritual life and ALL of them are gates of entrance into heaven.

So what does this mean to us? And why does this *matter* to us in our spiritual lives?

Well, the first vital lesson here is that the Lord loves variety. Whether we have rock solid faith or just a little faith, like a grain of mustard seed; whether we have deep, awe-inspired love for the Lord, or just simple charity toward the neighbor, the Lord loves us all and welcomes us all into His kingdom, provided only that we enter through the pearly gates and do not try to "climb up some other way" (John 10:1, 9).

Whether we are in the early stages of acknowledging the truth or far enough along to be wrestling with temptations; whether we are

simply doing good works or enjoying the deeper satisfaction and blessing of a charitable inner life, there is an angel at every gate welcoming all, and the gates are never shut at all by day, and there is no night there (Rev. 21:12, 25).

In fact, the principle of variety in heaven is so important that the Writings elaborate specifically on what you heard from the *Arcana* in our third lesson, saying in the book, *Heaven and Hell*,

“Variety in worship of the Lord resulting from the variety of good in one society and another is not harmful but beneficial, *for the perfection of heaven is therefrom....* Every unity has its existence from variety, for a unity that is not the result of variety is not anything; it has no form and therefore no quality. When, on the other hand, a unity comes into existence from various parts, and these various parts are in a perfect form in which each attaches itself in series, like a congenial friend to another, then the quality is perfect. So heaven is a unity resulting from the arrangements of various parts in the most perfect form, for the heavenly form is the most perfect of all forms” (HH #56).

And further,

“It is worthy of mention that the more there are in one society of heaven, all acting as one, the more perfect is its human form, for variety arranged in a heavenly form is what makes perfection, as was shown above (n. 56) and variety results from plurality. Moreover, every society of heaven increases in number from day to day and as it increases, it becomes more perfect. Thus not only does the society become more perfect, but also heaven in general because it is made up of societies” (HH #71).

The inclusiveness of heaven is represented by the enormous size of the city, and the mutual love of all who live there by the transparent gold of the structure itself. But again, our special focus today is the variety of ways people are invited into this fabulous caring environment. And again, they include all states and every point of view: some through deep wisdom, some in simplicity, some through more loving ways, some more thoughtful, some through analytical ways and some artistic, some no doubt through greater focus on details and other with greater focus on the big picture. No wonder the 12 points of the old Boy Scout law come to mind, as *people in heaven are* “trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.” We don’t have to know everything, we don’t have to feel a deep well of passion, and we certainly don’t have to get everything right. We just have to acknowledge the Lord and do our best in our own ways to follow Him.

Something else to note about the 12 gates in the vision is that although they gave access to the city through “a great and high wall” (roughly equal to the height of an 11 story building) that wall was crystal clear and not designed to keep anybody out, but rather to contain and protect the integrity of all that was within. You see, that wall represents the literal sense of the Word, which contains and protects the integrity of the spiritual sense – and the life according to that sense. It is not intended as a barrier or an obstacle but as a protection for the good inside. Thus the wall is easily penetrated through direct teachings (*passages*, to play on words) easily accessed from every perspective, and yet it marks the boundaries of what is good and true by providing the literal imagery and story lines that hold it all together.

What this means for us is that we will enter through the gates into the city by approaching and learning the literal sense of the Word. And we will do that by spending time with it, reflecting on it, and

working to see how it opens up for us and invites us in. It's interesting, by the way, that although Jasper is usually an opaque red, yellow or brown stone, the colors come from the inclusion of various minerals. The fact that this wall was made of *crystal clear jasper* means that it represents pure truths, without the inclusion of anything extra – translucent because of the spiritual sense shining through it for those who have the interest.

There are many gates of entrance into the church that is the New Jerusalem, each one providing access through the Word in some unique way. Yet the church is one, and its members will be one, supporting and complementing each other when we acknowledge the Lord, whose love is all-inclusive, and when we live in genuine charity toward one another.

Amen.

Lessons: *John* 10:1-16

Children's talk on the door of the sheepfold

Revelation 21:9-21 & 25

Arcana Caelestia #1285:2-3