# SERMON SERIES: THEN SINGS MY SOUL

# “Shall We Gather At The River”

*Revelation 22:1-5*

***Bertrand Russell was called the greatest intellectual mind of the twentieth century. Anticipating his death he said, “There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing.” Russell was an avowed atheist and saw only emptiness and termination at the point of death.***

***One of the greatest intellectual minds of the first century AD was undoubtedly the apostle Paul. Anticipating his death, this is what he said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8:* The time of my death is near. 7I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. 8And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me…**

***Two famous men. One, an atheist, did not know God. The other did. When it came to their views of death, knowing God made all the difference. And so did thinking about what lies on the other side of the doorway called death.***

Today is the third week in our four-week sermon series entitled “Then Sings My Soul.” In this series we’ve been studying some of the best-loved hymns of the church and the theology they teach; then we’ve linked that traditional hymn to a modern song that echoes the same theology. Let’s go ahead and turn to our Scripture reading, Revelation 22:1-5.

How do we know what heaven is like? Our only dependable authority is the Bible. And based on the glimpses it gives us, heaven will be beautiful and wonderful—a world that cannot be exhausted, yielding new treasures and richness for our amazement and delight.

***In anticipating heaven, I sometimes remember my first experience snorkeling. I was part of a mission team to a poor island in the Bahamas, and one afternoon we went snorkeling near the ruins of an old ship. I remember my astonishment as I swam along: there were countless fish of every shape and size. The colors were vivid and breathtaking. I swam along reefs covered with schools of small fish, darting and hiding among the plants. I came face-to-face with a moray eel—and I parted company with him immediately! It seemed that just when I’d gotten used to the underwater sights, something even more striking caught my eye. I imagine heaven will be somewhat like that. Our first gasp of wonder will be followed by even more stunning, magnificent experiences and images!***

John the Revelator, as he is sometimes known, was the author of the letter of Revelation. He wrote this sometimes-confusing, sometimes-peculiar, sometimes-dazzling letter to seven churches that were experiencing persecution from the Roman Empire and Jewish synagogues.

The letter of Revelation is a vision that John received from Jesus, and an important part of that vision was a glimpse of heaven. Let’s look at our Scripture reading, Revelation 22:1-5: *Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.*

*3No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. 4And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. 5And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.*

John’s vision reflects an unmistakable parallel with the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:10 we read *A river flowed from the land of Eden, watering the garden…* and in John’s vision we read of *…a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*

The Garden of Eden represented the perfect place of God’s presence. Heaven represents the perfect place of God’s presence where the redeemed will see the face of God.

Eden was a place of purity where no sin could remain. Revelation 21:27 affirms the same thing: *Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty...* Heaven is the place where disease, infirmities, mental illness, war, violence, hatred, bigotry and death do not exist.

Heaven is a place of worship: *and his servants will worship him.* Revelation 21:22 tells us *I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.* Christ will be the focus of all. ***Can you imagine worship without pretense or distraction? And how we respond will be much like what we heard in our Prelude this morning, “I Can Only Imagine:” Will I dance for you Jesus / Or in awe of you be still / Will I stand in your presence / Or to my knees will I fall / Will I sing hallelujah / Will I be able to speak at all.”***

Heaven is a place of reunions and fellowship. Jesus promised in Matthew 8:11 that we would eat and drink with him, along with Abraham and the other patriarchs. We’ll meet and know and interact with one another. ***I used to tell my youth group—especially if I was meeting new youth for the first time—that I was a bit different and weird, and that if they didn’t get used to me here on earth, their first one thousand years in heaven would be miserable!***

We’ll converse with the angels. ***Can you imagine speaking with the angels who watched over you and protected you while you were alive? Imagine how many close calls they will be able to show us!*** In heaven we’ll continue to be creative, to remember our lives on earth, to learn. In our resurrection bodies we’ll participate in God’s redemptive activity, and experience an eternity that is constantly new, fresh, joyful and peaceful--all in the presence of the King of Kings!

Let’s take a look at one of the traditional hymns of the church that speak about heaven. It’s entitled “Shall We Gather At The River.” You’ll find it on your bulletin insert. It was written in 1864 by Robert Lowry. Lowry’s own words describe the inspiration for the hymn.

***“One af­ter­noon in Ju­ly, 1864, when I was pas­tor at Han­son Place Bap­tist Church, Brook­lyn, the wea­ther was op­press­ive­ly hot, and I was ly­ing [down] in a state of phys­ic­al ex­haust­ion… My imag­in­a­tion be­gan to take [flight]. Vi­sions of the fu­ture passed be­fore me with start­ling vi­vid­ness…Bright­est of all were the throne, the heav­en­ly ri­ver, and the ga­ther­ing of the saints…I be­gan to won­der why the hymn writ­ers had said so much about the “riv­er of death” and so lit­tle about the “pure wa­ter of life, clear as crys­tal…” As I [thought], the words be­gan to con­struct them­selves. They came first as a quest­ion of Christ­ian in­quiry, “Shall we ga­ther?” Then they broke in chor­us, “Yes, we’ll ga­ther.” On this quest­ion and an­swer the hymn developed itself .”***

The first verse of the hymn asks the question, **Shall we gather at the river, / where bright angel feet have trod, / With its crystal tide forever / flowing by the throne of God?** The chorus responds: **Yes, we’ll gather at the river, / the beautiful, the beautiful river; / gather with the saints at the river / that flows by the throne of God.**

Second verse: **On the margin of the river, / washing up its silver spray, / We**

**will walk and worship ever, / all the happy golden day.** So Lowry echoed the words of John the Revelator, envisioning our worship and ongoing fellowship with the saints and angels.

The last sentence of our Scripture reading says *And they* [God’s servants] *will reign forever and ever.* The third verse of Lowry’s hymn expresses this in different terms but the theme remains the same: **Ere we reach the shining river, / lay we every burden down; / grace our spirits will deliver, / and provide a robe and crown.** **ASK: Now who is it that has the privilege of wearing a crown?** Those who rule and reign, right? So in heaven we have the honor of ruling and reigning with Christ!

And finally, Lowry concludes his hymn by saying **Soon we’ll reach the shining river, / soon our pilgrimage will cease; / soon our happy hearts will quiver / with the melody of peace.** It’s in Hebrews 13:14 that we find the assurance *For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come.* At the moment of our death, our journey through this life ends. Our flesh and blood will cease but our spirits will rise to the home for which we were always made.

And it is this ‘rising’ that give us our transition to a contemporary song that echoes the doctrine of heaven. Written in 2008, the song “I Will Rise” by Chris Tomlin says **There's a peace I've come to know, / though my heart and flesh may fail / There's an anchor for my soul, / I can say “It is well” / Jesus has overcome and the grave is overwhelmed / The victory is won, He is risen from the dead.** And then the chorus sounds forth: **And I will rise when He calls my name / No more sorrow, no more pain / I will rise on eagles' wings / Before my God fall on my knees / And rise, I will rise.**

  Here Tomlin acknowledges that even though our heart and flesh may fail, those who have entrusted themselves to Christ can say “It is well,” which is in itself a reference to the beloved hymn “It Is Well With My Soul.” And I will rise when He calls my name—comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: *16For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. 17Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever.*

The second verse of “I Will Rise” says **There's a day that's drawing near, / when this / darkness breaks to light / and the shadows disappear / And my faith shall be my eyes.** Our Scripture reading, Revelation 22:5, promises us *And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them.* No darkness, no deceitfulness, no separation, no sin.

The gospel of John, 14:1-3, is widely used during funerals to provide comfort for the grieving. On his last night on earth, Jesus told his disciples *1“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. 2There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? 3When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*”

Jesus has prepared a place for our immortal souls. ***When you were expecting your first child, do you remember the care and attention that went into preparing the nursery? Perhaps you picked out a particular color of paint or border for the walls. You selected a crib and changing table. You had diapers and baby powder and a rocking chair sitting patiently, awaiting your bundle of joy. The quality of the nursery we prepared was limited only by our skills, resources and imaginations.***

Now pause for a moment and try to visualize the place Jesus has prepared for us, knowing that Jesus is not constrained by skills or resources or imagination. Our minds really can’t grasp it, can we? It’s beyond the scope of our limited abilities. That’s why the apostle Paul could say *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1st Corinthians 2:9).

Heaven is about reunions and remembering. It is about wholeness and healing. Heaven is the wedding feast of the Lamb, the church triumphant and evil extinguished forever. But mostly it is about Jesus Christ, the Lamb at the center of the throne.

***The Gaither Vocal Band captured this in their song “I Bowed On My Knees.”***

***“As I entered the gates of that city, / all my loved ones they knew me well / They took me down the streets of Heaven / O, the scenes too many to tell / I saw Abraham, and there was Jacob and Isaac / I talked with Mark, sat down with Timothy / But I said, Timothy “I want to see Jesus, / ‘Cause He's the One who died for me” / I bowed on my knees and cried, “Holy, Holy, Holy” / I clapped my hands and sang, “Glory, Glory, Glory, Glory .”***

Let us pray:

*Lord Jesus, divine Carpenter who has prepared a place—a home—for our weary souls—we pause to thank you for the heaven that awaits us. We long for the day when we shall gather at the river with our loved ones and the saints of old. Through the cross you have overcome death for us. Through your burial and resurrection you have made the grave a holy place and restored to us eternal life.*

*O Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world, and who is alive forevermore, in silence we remember someone dear to us who even now waits for us on the banks of that silver river... We remember a spouse, a parent, a child; we remember a friend of many years… We give you thanks for those who died believing in you and who await us even now. Let their faces come to our minds; let their warmth touch us once again.*

*And in our minds eye we see them smiling at us and we hear them say, “You won’t believe what it’s like. It’s greater and richer and deeper and more powerful than we ever imagined! It’s home,” they say to us, “and there’s a seat at the table for you.”*

*Thank you, Jesus, for heaven. Amen.*

And now let us hold the image of our loved ones before us as we close by singing “Shall We Gather At The River.”