

System failure: Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

by [J. Nelson Kraybill](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

"A virus breached the campus computer network last week and the entire system crashed. Repair has been difficult, but I bring a word of hope." The director of information technology at the college where I was about to lecture on eschatology added, "This has been frustrating for everyone. Files have been corrupted and programs do not run properly. Please be patient. Some files have been restored. . . . Any day now we will be back to full operation."

How would I begin my lecture on eschatology when the resident computer expert had just summarized the essence of Christian hope? It was all there: the system has crashed, files have been corrupted, everyone is frustrated. War destroys societies and terrorism strikes every continent. Business leaders are convicted of fraud, clergy of unspeakable conduct.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed . . ." Even W. B. Yeats ("The Second Coming") could not match the poet who penned Revelation. With breathtaking audacity, John blasts the greed, violence and arrogance of an empire that matched any evil we see on CNN. The "divine" Roman emperor (and his empire) is a Beast that "fornicates" with kings of the earth by demanding unholy allegiance. Emperor worship penetrates every aspect of the economy so that no one can "buy or sell without the mark of the beast." Subject peoples kowtow to blasphemous claims of empire. But empire is hubris, and will not last.

Recent pop eschatology novels feature Christians being whisked to the ease of heavenly bleachers as spectators of global suffering. In contrast to such escapism, John of Patmos sees heaven coming to earth. For John, the reign of God comes down from heaven as a beautiful city. In Revelation 21 this artist-theologian visualizes "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The New Jerusalem is not simply where we go when we die. It also is the worldwide political and economic arrangement that God is bringing to reality among those who follow the Lamb rather than the Beast.

Last summer I ached for that new reality when I attended a church conference in Zimbabwe. Inflation galloped at such a pace there that locals joked that it was more economical to use the currency as toilet paper than to buy toilet paper. If the “honorable” President Robert Mugabe’s motorcade happened by, friends warned, I was not to make any gesture or say anything that suggested disapproval of the dictator. At a pastor’s home where I stayed overnight, the family was so poor that the sagging mattress was without sheets and pillowcases. Starvation stalked parts of Zimbabwe, and most people are unemployed. *Things fall apart.*

Meanwhile my country has spent billions of dollars to bring an oil-rich nation to its knees. My airfare to Zimbabwe cost the equivalent of 6 million Zim dollars. The disparity of resources was of apocalyptic proportions. It is too simplistic to blame the U.S. for Zimbabwe’s woes. There is homegrown evil there too. But something has put the world economy off-center and blinded my nation to justice. If God “judges the peoples with equity and guides nations upon earth,” this comfortable Westerner should brace for judgment.

John of Patmos blamed Rome for the greed and violence that enslaved millions and enriched the few. He was certain “Babylon” would fall—as all empires eventually do. With unblinking eye, John foresees the long death throes of Rome and its global tentacles. But it is shining light from the New Jerusalem envisioned at the end of Revelation that illuminates the landscape and provides sustaining hope.

What a city! Make no snide remarks about “streets of gold,” because Revelation 21 depicts a radical new economic and political order that will replace the banks and corporations and armies that dominate our world. Built on a foundation of the apostles of Jesus Christ, the New Jerusalem will encompass the whole world as John knew it—1,500 miles from one end of the Roman Empire to the other.

The New Jerusalem already is “coming down out of heaven.” John’s vision is a mission mandate for the church to be a global harbinger of the city whose “gates will never be shut.” The city is so inclusive that even “kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” Kings of the earth! Just a few chapters ago they were in bed with the Beast, and now God designs to redeem even them? Watch amazed as Saddam Hussein, Ariel Sharon, Robert Mugabe, George Bush and countless others lay down their weapons, share resources and follow the Lamb.

An embarrassment of wealth is shared by all in the New Jerusalem. No America-Zimbabwe disparity here! The Lamb is at the center of this startling political and economic transformation, and from the city flows a “river of the water of life.” Leaves from a tree nurtured by the river bring healing to the nations—healing for Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, Sudan and America.

The system has crashed, and only God can fix it. With the promise of restoration any day now, the “Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’” This same Spirit, Jesus declared, would remind his followers of “all that I have said to you.” Jesus said a lot about how we live, and the Spirit nudges us to put this teaching into practice. No, the church is not a full realization of the New Jerusalem. But we who follow the Lamb have our citizenship and primary loyalty there, and we already live in its transforming light.