

Being the Church in light of our eternal hope

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[0 : 00] We're going to do a Bible reading now from Revelation. We'll be reading chapter 1 and then chapter 21. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him, even so.

[1 : 16] Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs on his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun, shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead, but he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

[2 : 41] I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Now reading from Revelation 21, first 11 verses. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

[3 : 46] Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who is seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.

Also he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. And he said to me, It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the

spring of the water of life, without payment.

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God, and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Then came one of the seven angels, who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

Having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. Okay, well, why don't we get underway and get into God's word?

[5 : 03] Before we do that, I'm David. I'm one of the pastors here. If you're visiting this morning, a warm welcome to you. And I'd like to pray before we get into God's word.

So why don't we pray together? Lord, as we've heard your word read, that you're present in your church, and you are powerfully speaking by your spirit through your word, I pray that you would be applying your word to each one of us where we are at.

Give us ears to hear you. Lord, some of us are in love with the things of this world. Lord, I pray that you would expose how empty they are and fill us with true riches.

Lord, some of us are feeling, I suppose, disillusioned and have grown weary in doing good. I pray that you would give us a refreshed vision of yourself to help us have joy in serving you again.

Lord, some of us are burdened by sin and just a sense of unworthiness. And I pray that you would, like the Apostle John, that you would put your hand on each of our shoulders and saying, fear not.

[6 : 24] Lord, we each need you to speak. So I pray that you would speak to each one of us in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, today we, as David's bulletin church email said, we're finishing off our church series, our church series.

I hope my mind gets engaged soon, otherwise you guys are in for a rough ride here. But our series on the church, that's what it is. We set out to see the church through God's eyes, not just our own eyes, but through God's.

I made you turn around and talk to the people around you, so did Catherine, to the kids. Like, I enjoy being part of this community and all. Like, there's a lot of benefits.

It's really quite pleasant. But what do you think of our series title, Church is to be a foretaste of heaven? That's a bit rich, isn't it?

Like, come on. Have you just dismissed that, thinking it's a marketing ploy from us preachers, going, come on, get volunteering more in this church?

[7 : 36] Have you just got... Yeah, they're just exaggerating. Have you written it off? If you haven't, if in this series you've seen God's vision for his gathered people under his rule, characterised by holiness and unity and love, worshipping him and being a bright light to the world of the saving power of Jesus, the more serious you get about that and pushing...

it pushes you into real engagement in this local community, the more you see the flaws in church, don't you? It's like the reality of coming home from your honeymoon and it sinks in.

Oh, I have married a sinful person. Oh. The flaws become more real the more serious you take God's word.

The deeper the relationships, the more you will get hurt in this community. The more it demands not just bearing your own struggles in life, but you want to bear all of our struggles.

The more responsibility it places on you because the burdens of the church aren't just the staffs, it's not the leadership, it's our burden to carry. So it's not a few Christians who have been once serious about the local church have been disillusioned and now they're just willing to dip their toe into the church, afraid, I think.

[9 : 19] There's not a few Christians hopping around Newcastle looking for that better church, that perfect church. A foretaste of heaven? It's a nice theory.

It's a nice theory, isn't it? But it's idealistic. I'm not saying it is. I'm saying our attitudes can treat it that way.

Is anyone else feeling warm or is it just me? Not feeling warm? Okay, it's just me. Just wondered if we need the air con on. I don't want to put you to sleep. If we lose the vision of the church from God's eyes, if we lose that hope of heaven, then I think it leaves space in our imaginations, it leaves

space in our hope vacant.

It leaves it empty. It leaves it empty. And the world, in what it offers, will quickly fill it. It will be filled. I'm going to quote a guy called David Foster Wallace.

He's an unbeliever. And he said it better than I can, which is why I'm quoting him, at a university commencement speech in 2005 at Kenyon College in the US.

[10:32] Now, it's a bit of a lengthy quote, but I think it's worth getting across. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships.

The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

Worship power. You will end up feeling weak and afraid. And you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect.

Being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self.

[11:52] That's an unbeliever saying that. If we don't fill our minds with the hope of heaven, we will fill it with something else.

And the remedy for both undervaluing Christ's flawed church, local church, and worshipping some created good, trying to have heaven now, the remedy is the same, isn't it?

To fill our minds with what God says heaven will be like. If we see the church through God's eyes, the glorious riches of heaven, then I think we'll find that our concerns with the local church aren't actually too big but too small.

And I think we'll find that the desires that are trying to have heaven now, our desires aren't too strong, they're too weak. When God offers us so much more.

C.S. Lewis says, Our love for this world, like money, beauty, and family and so on, we are like kids, poor kids in a slum, where we're so satisfied by making mud pies in the dirt that when someone offers us a holiday at the beach, we don't want it because we're so satisfied in the dirt.

[13:13] He's saying our desires aren't too big, it's too small. We need a clear picture of what God has promised. So that's why we're getting into Revelation in this final talk.

Revelation helps us see the church now, the local church, as it really is in the first few chapters, and it sees our eternal hope of where we're going. Now just to help us get into Revelation, Revelation is meant to be relevant to every generation of the church.

Revelation is meant to be relevant to every generation of the church. It's not just saying what will happen in the future, or it's not just saying what happened in John's day. It is addressed in verse 1 to Christ's servants.

So if you're a servant of Christ, this is written for you. Verse 3 says you'll be blessed if you persevere in understanding this book. I think, let me just give you two quick tips, I suppose, for understanding Revelation, because I think they go a long way in making it less scary and the meaning just becoming rich.

The first is just understand the genre. It's a picture book. In Romans we get logic and reason, Revelation, it's pictures. So we need to treat it as pictures, which I really...

[14:34] I love picture books, and it's great. It captures the imagination. The second thing we need to understand is a lot of these pictures, nearly all of them, come from Scripture.

So it's not like you need... Commentators and things are absolutely helpful, don't get me wrong, but we've got all the pictures we need here. We've got all we need to understand this book.

These are real churches that are being addressed in the region of Asia, and they're facing two real threats.

One is the threat of persecution from Jews and Romans, but the other thing they're facing, and I think we forget this when reading Revelation, is they're tempted to just find heaven now in the Roman Empire, to have your status and wealth and safety and wellbeing here.

So there's threat of persecution, but there's also temptation of just love this world, which is exactly where every church in every age is faced with.

[15 : 43] I think verse 9 helps us understand where the book takes us, and I'm hoping where our time together in this sermon will take us. So I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.

The tribulation, the kingdom, and the patient endurance. John is enslaved on an island for his faith in Jesus, but he can endure it patiently because he knows the promised kingdom that is his. And so too the church. Now is tribulation, trouble. But we can patiently endure because we know what the outcome is going to be.

We have the kingdom. We know we belong to the Alpha and the Omega. We can patiently endure. So now the church is marked by present tribulation, trouble, striving. So we see that in chapters 1 to 3. What is Jesus doing now?

[17 : 06] What is he doing? He has all authority. What is he doing? Well, he is present in his struggling churches.

He is speaking by his spirit through his word. To what end? To prepare his bride for himself. John turns to see the voice speaking to him.

And what does he see? He sees seven lampstands. And we're told what they represent. These lampstands represent the local churches, real churches.

Now, there were ten local churches in Asia of the time. So the selection of seven, seven is just a repeated number in this book and throughout Scripture.

It can represent completion. Another way to understand it is the essence of something. So as we come to the seven churches, it's saying this is what the church is really like.

[18 : 12] This is the essence of how the church is. I don't think we should read it as let's find what grace evangelical is like. Are we like Ephesus or Smyrna? This is saying we're always like all of these.

We're always facing these. Some individuals, sometimes more than others, but this is all seven letters are for us. It's always relevant.

If we pin these seven churches on a map, it forms something of a circle. And what do we see in the middle of the circle? Jesus.

That's where he is. That's what he's up to. All his attention is for his people. God's faithful witness to the truth.

The firstborn of the dead. The ruler of the kings of the world. If you want truth and life and power, it's all in him. And he's using it all for his church.

[19 : 19] It's a human figure like that of Daniel 7. He's dressed like a priest or a king or a judge. He's holy. His hair is white.

Those with white hair celebrating that. He's holy. He's pure. His eyes are like flaming fire. He sees things as they are. He looks through any pretense.

He sees it as it is. His feet are bronze. He is strong. Like an NRL player trying to tackle those feet. He's not budging.

He is strong. His voice is powerful. It's a two-edged sword just piercing through either in judgment or in healing. He's divine.

His face radiant like the sun. John saw this glory one time before when he was up on the mountain transfiguration. Now he sees it now that he's risen and ascended in all his glory.

[20 : 22] He falls down as though dead. But see his grace. He has died and he's alive and he can say to John, fear not.

You don't have to be afraid in my presence. You can have peace. You can enjoy my presence. What does our Lord care about the most?

His church. That's what he's up to. Who's at the center of the church? Not you. Not me. Not us even. He is.

It's about him. He created the church. It exists and grows through him and it is for him. If you're disillusioned by the local church, by this local church, that we're not what we ought to be, you're right.

You're right. Because it's time for much tribulation, struggle. But that is no reason to disengage. Jesus isn't disengaged.

[21 : 35] His church is the apple of his eye. We're still called to be his light in the world. So if we step back from these seven letters, I'm not going to go through the detail.

But if we step back and we ask, what is he doing? What is Jesus' goal? He's preparing us for that day when we will be in heaven.

He's calling for whole of heart, all of life, devotion to him. He's not just critical.

He knows us. He sees us. He commends us for the devotion. He sees in us. I know your works. I know your love and faith. I know your love for the truth. And that you hate those who take people away from the truth.

I know that you're standing up under trials. I know. I see. I'm here. He commends.

[22 : 39] But he also sees where our devotion is lacking. John Stott describes it like he is the divine lover. And he's pining for our continuing, deepening, maturing adoration.

This I have against you. Sometimes we have good doctrine. We know the truth, but we don't have love. We don't love God and one another in the world like we should.

That's fantastic. Stick to the truth. But it's empty without love. Sometimes we need to care more about doctrine because the lies are drawing people away from Jesus.

Truth matters. Sometimes our conscience has stopped caring about immorality that dishonors him and puts distance between him and us and one another.

We need to take immorality seriously. Sometimes we think we are rich. We've got new clothes, a better car, higher salary.

[23 : 55] Our affluence here is so dangerous. Jesus looks at when we have that attitude and goes, you're blind. You don't see how you really are.

You think you don't need me. I'm about to spit you out. You think you're fine on your own. Affluence is so dangerous. It puts us to sleep.

It makes us self-dependent. Where's your enthusiasm for me? If you like me, all of these describe me at some points.

Or another way of saying it is all of these describe me pretty much all the time. Struggle. It is time for tribulations.

And faith in Jesus looks like conquering. To he who conquers. You have to conquer these things by trusting in him. To fight for our love for him.

[24 : 54] Now how do we do it? We do it listening to him. We've got to listen to him. But how does he motivate us? The primary way he motivates us is he promises to him who conquers.

And then he reminds us what he will share with us in the promised kingdom to come. He's going to share his immortal resurrected life. Don't fear what can happen.

Standing up for me. I will share my life with you. I will share my status as belonging to God. His family. I will share the security where one day you will know nothing can harm you.

Nothing. I can't even imagine that. We're told to imagine it because it's coming. I will share my pure character with you.

Don't come with your filthy rags of trying to be a good person. They're filthy. I'll clothe you. I'm going to give you my character. I'm going to share my rule over the world with you.

[25 : 57] I'm going to share my riches with you. That's how we conquer. Trusting his promises. And the one who stands speaking and promising these things, he knows the end.

He is the end. He's written the end. He knows we will adore him as we should one day. And so he calls for us to live now more and more in light of that.

So that's why I think if you've been disillusioned by the local church, I don't think your concerns are too big. They're probably too small.

I think we often place ourselves at the centre. To give just one example, what hurts the most, conflict in the church.

I think we often care about relational conflict because it hurts. It really does. And we're ready to break fellowship. We care about getting, I suppose, justice, understanding.

[27 : 10] When our bigger concern should be demonstrating the reconciling power of the gospel. Are we concerned that breaking fellowship is going to undermine the message that Jesus unites all?

Are we concerned with his glory? I think our concerns aren't too big.

They're too small. What right have I, what right have you to give up on the people Jesus died for, whom he's loving and whom he will perfect?

Now, the way we value God's church isn't to expect the church to be lovely. It's not lovely. There's bits of loveliness, but it's not lovely yet.

We're not lovely yet. The way is to fall back in love with Jesus. And when you love Jesus, he loves his church. And that's when we'll rekindle our affection for one another.

[28 : 28] So that's the church as it is now. It's time for struggle. But how do we patiently endure? Looking at what we will be, God's vision of heaven.

So flipping over to chapter 21, if you're following along in your Bibles, I think we can narrow what heaven will be like in our imagination to true aspects.

I'm not saying these are not true. I'm just saying we can narrow it down to just one thing. Like, we're going to be free from a suffering body. Wow. Bring it on.

That's going to be great. But what's the purpose of that? Or we're going to be reunited with believing loved ones. Wow. That's going to be fantastic.

These are great, but I think they're just incomplete. It's not God's full picture. One of the great blessings that God gives us is he tells us where history is headed.

[29 : 37] We're not in the dark. We know where we're going. We know what we're aiming for. Chapter 21, then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Our hope isn't so much that our spirits are going to go to heaven. Our hope is that heaven is going to come live with us on earth. It's going to be a new earth. And in this new creation, what are we shown most in chapter 21?

You'd expect the focus to be on Jesus, right? Or the wonderful place. And there is, that is in here. But surprisingly, a stranger takes center stage along with Jesus.

It's the city of Jesus' died four people coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And we're told in chapter 9, it gets in, chapter 9, verse 9, come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.

Our attention is drawn to the church. There's a preacher in the US who lived a long time ago now, but Jonathan Edwards, some of you would have heard his name.

[30 : 57] Now, his sermons, you read them and, wow, they are technical, they are logical. That's all to say that he's not given to flowery language like Spurgeon was.

But he's got a sermon that I found so encouraging and it's called Heaven is a World of Love. I would encourage you to listen to it.

It's based on 1 Corinthians 13 that right now through scripture we see God truly. It's true what we learn about God, but it's like looking dimly through a mirror.

But then we'll see him face to face. We'll know him truly as we are truly known. And what that means is love, charity for one another, is forever.

It's a world of love. His face will be the scripture we read. Knowledge of God will fill that world and each person to the full.

[31 : 58] There won't be a bit of darkness. It will be constant daytime there. There's no night. Light, knowledge of God will fill us, each one of us and all of us and everything in it, in that world.

His spirit, like a stream, will turn into a river and turn into an ocean that will just nourish us fully, always producing goodness, blessing.

In our heart and mind, try and imagine this because I don't think we've had this to the full yet in this life. There will not be a hint of doubt, not a hint that God loves you.

There won't be a hint of doubt that God loves your brother and sister next to you. There won't be a hint of fear that he'll stop loving you because we know it will be forever.

Now, I'm looking forward to that. And that being filled with his love is going to spill over in how we treat one another. Nothing unclean will enter that city.

[33 : 13] There won't be any lies or temptation anymore. There won't be a sinful nature to wrestle with. That sin you did again this week that you are sick of doing, you won't be struggling with that anymore.

Full devotion to him. The church is pictured as a city with dimensions as a cube. The only other cube in Scripture is the Holy of Holies in the temple.

This is where God will dwell, in his people, the church. Now, that's almost blasphemous. It's almost blasphemous to say that we are his temple.

But that's what God says. We will be holy. Like, I was shocked this week in verse 11. Listen, the church is described as having the glory of God.

And you read the Old Testament. Like, when Ezekiel saw his vision, he's like, the kind of likeness similar to the glory of God. He was careful in describing what he saw.

[34 : 28] This is just, we will have the glory of God. Like, wow. We will be holy. Holy love. There's every reason to see this worship of God as expressed in community.

There's not individual brides. We're one bride. It's not families and clans. It's one family. Not individual churches. It's one church. Unity centered on Jesus.

Full trust. Like, imagine relating to someone where there's zero pretense. There's zero faking. I think we're all, it's just a matter of degree that we're doing it.

There will be none of that anymore in this community. We will trust each other's motives because we know that we'll be devoted to God, that whatever we say and do to each other, it's like our motives will be transparent glass.

We'll see right into the heart. It's fully sincere and it's full of authenticity. It's full of passion for God. That's going to be an incredible community to be a part of.

[35 : 39] Whatever conflict you've had with another brother or sister in the church, in that day, I think the picture here tells us that you will love them more fully than you've ever known love in this life.

It's hard to imagine. I don't know how he's going to do it. But that's the world of love we're pictured here. To quote Jonathan Edwards, this world here is like a tempestuous sea.

Selfishness, envy and revenge and jealousy keep life on earth in a constant tumult and make it a scene of confusion and uproar where no quiet rest is to be enjoyed except in renouncing this world and looking to another.

But oh, what rest is there in that world that the God of peace and love fills with his own gracious presence where there is no enemy and no enmity, but where there is perfect love in every being. This is God's rest to be at home with his people. It's the end of his work of creation. It's the end of his work of salvation. It's as if Christ has said, I am not starting the wedding feast of heaven until you, my beloved, are with me.

[37 : 19] Heaven is a world of love. God's love for his bride, the church, the church fully responding with passionate love for God, which will overflow into love for our neighbour.

This is our glorious inheritance. A day is coming when this is going to be our daily experience. How good is that? So in light of this promised world of love, are you thirsting for it?

If you're not, either I failed to express it clearly today, which is possible, or maybe you've just had a super rough week and your mind is just zapped.

That's possible too. But if you're not thirsting for it, you need to do some serious soul searching. Because it might be that you're still just head over heels in love with this world and you're coming to this community, but you're not in the church.

[38 : 41] Jesus stands at the door and knocks.

He wants to come in. But there might be others here who may well believe this world is coming. You just really doubt that it's for you. You doubt that you're worthy of this. You believe it's coming. The certainty of the promise. It's just, I'm not worthy of it. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

I'm going to steal an illustration from a preacher, Alistair Begg. Some of you will know it. But he's talking about the thief on the cross and how Jesus promised a thief on the cross.

[39 : 56] Today you'll be with me in paradise. And Alistair Begg is like, I can't wait in heaven to find that fella and ask him, how did that shape out for you?

Like you were cussing the guy while you were on the cross. You've never been to a Bible study. You've never been baptised. You didn't know a thing about church membership.

And yet you made it. How did you make it? And that's what the angel must have said. What are you doing here? I don't know. Excuse me.

I'm just going to go get my supervisor. The supervisor angel comes over. Sir, we just have a few questions for you. Are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith? I've never heard of it in my life.

Eventually in frustration he asked, on what basis are you here? And he said, the man on the middle cross said, I can come. I love that.

[41 : 01] Because it just, if you've got no hope in yourself, that's the point. You're fit for heaven. Because that's all we're going to be doing. Praising what he's done. Amen. So, what kind of church

will we be if we set our hope on the full taste of heaven that is coming?

We're going to be filled with awe. We're going to be leaning forward in anticipation. We're going to see the gap between what is promised to us and what I deserve.

And we're going to be humble. praising his cross only. We're going to be groaning because our current inconsistent, tainted devotion to the one who loved us so much is just a taste of what's coming.

And we're groaning now. But we won't lose heart. We won't discourage because the grace we have experienced in him, we will give that grace to our brothers and sisters.

And we know who it is who says we will make it. It's the Alpha and the Omega who said, I will get you there. We will be so devoted to his great building project of his people that we will stop mucking around with what this world hopes in because it's just glitter.

[42 : 50] There won't be any cost too great. Not too much time or money or service. The risk of moving your family to another country.

No cost will be too great. If Christ's church is built, if Christ's people are built up in their devotion to him.

In short, if we see through God's eyes and we know the full banquet of heaven is coming, we're going to do anything we can to get more and more of a taste of that world of love now.

To get ourselves ready. Because by striving to be the church, that will be a lampstand, will be a light.

That it is so good to belong to Jesus. We will honour him. So church, a foretaste of heaven?

[44 : 02] Absolutely. It's just a taste. We need to set our hope on the full banquet. Let me pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for your blood.

That means that we are ransomed from this empty way of life that this world chases after. Lord, please fill us with that picture of your church adoring you so that we might be a light for your name to bring honour to you in this world and be used by you to build individuals up in knowing you and in building your church, both here in this church family but also all over the world.

Lord, fill us with this vision. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.