

10/07/2018 - Revelation 21 - 22

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- [0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, I remember, I don't remember a ton about Sunday school growing up, but I do remember my sixth grade Sunday school class at the church where I grew up and I remember the teacher.
- He was this kind of, he was really kind and nice, but he was kind of this big heavy guy and middle-aged. And I don't remember a lot of the lessons, but I do remember one class.
- It was a bunch of boys in the room and he gathered us all up and he said, I want you to tell me what you think the most perfect place in the world could be.
- I think this was his way of trying to introduce the idea of heaven. He was going to teach us this, but he asked us what we thought the most perfect place was. And it was springtime. I had just gotten back from snow skiing with my parents.
- And so what I told him was, naturally, the best place in the world had to be a really incredible ski mountain. It was never too cold. There were no lift lines.
- [1 : 0 0] All my friends were there. Every time you got on a lift, they handed you hot chocolate with really good marshmallows. And there was even deep powder everywhere. So when you took big jumps, you never got hurt or anything like that.
- I'm sure that after we went around and he told us, talked to us about that, he brought it in some way to some sort of lesson. But I don't remember anything about the lesson. All I remember is thinking heaven has to be like a really great ski mountain.
- And I will tell you, for years, I kind of assumed that heaven was this otherworldly place, this fantasy play land in my own head.
- But I think a lot of us spend a lot of time thinking about what is going to happen to us when we die. What is out there? We probably don't spend a lot of time, but occasionally we come across times where we ask these natural questions about what's in store for us.
- It touches something of our fears and our insecurities. My family had this cat that died a few years ago. We liked the cat. The cat's name was Fiesta Kitty.
- [2 : 0 8] My daughter named her that because Fiesta Kitty brings the party with her. And she died a couple of years ago. And I won't tell the story of her tragic demise, but it was fantastic.
- And we ended up having a funeral for Fiesta Kitty in our side yard. And we had a bunch of neighbor kids there and some neighbors who were all involved in her death. And we had a funeral.
- And I remember one of the children, and I don't know if it was one of my children or one of the neighbor kids, asking, well, are our pets in heaven?
- You know, what happened to Fiesta Kitty? It's a really good and a right question for a child to ask. I don't remember what I actually said to them.
- I was probably dismissive and cold and said something like, well, that's not really that important, or a cat doesn't have a soul, so a cat can't be in heaven, or something like that. That was probably a terrible answer.

[3 : 09] But it did reinforce to me that that's the kind of question that we often ask, that we keep coming back to these big kinds of questions because each one of us intuitively knows that we're living in some sort of a story, right?

Stories that have beginnings and they have middles and they have ends. Whether it's the story of your pet cat coming to an end, or the story of your grandmother dying, or a cancer diagnosis, or God forbid you turn on the news in a week like this and you watch a political train wreck happening right before you.

There are stories that we're all living in, and so it's good for us to look at passages like this that bring us back to the grand story of the Bible, that grand story that talks about God's good creation and the fall of sin and the promise of a Savior and Christ coming to bring redemption and His people living on mission, and then finally Jesus bringing an end to all of that, a glorious end in the renewal of all things.

That's why we're looking at this, and here's why that's important, because if you can get the vision that God gives us for His renewal of all things, it will change the way that you live now.

That's the reason. No matter what stories you happen to be living in, whether it's stories of loss and pain, stories of triumph or stories of tragedy, stories of grace, stories of mercy.

[4 : 44] You're going to find that God's vision equips you and helps you to live in the midst of the stories that you're in. And so what does that look like?

Does it look like some sort of sweet ski mountain or some sort of clouds and harps in the sky or something else? Whatever happened to Fiesta Kitty after all? That's the kind of thing that this passage that we're looking at, it doesn't answer all the questions, of course.

We could talk about this for a long time, but what it does is it gives us a framework, and here's the framework. Here are the things that it tells us about the new heavens and the new earth. It says fundamentally that it is a real place, and it is filled with real people.

It's a real place, and it's filled with real people. This week I was really, I got a lot of enrichment out of this little book, and I want to recommend it to you right at the beginning by a guy named Richard Mao.

He is the, or was the president of Fuller Seminary for a long time. He's a great biblical scholar, and I just thought this book was excellent. And so I'd recommend it to you if you want to read more into some of these things.

[5 : 49] It's well worth the read. So the fundamental idea I grew up with was that heaven was a non-specific, non-physical kind of playground-ish place.

I don't know where I got that idea. Maybe it was, you know, at church. Maybe it was watching Tom and Jerry cartoons, which they often end up in heaven and hell. It's very bizarre if you've watched Tom and Jerry any time recently.

But that idea was, of course, totally wrong. I mean, John here in the book of Revelation calls it the new heavens and the new earth.

Look back at chapter 21, verse 1. We're going to look through this passage, so have your bulletins handy. 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, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Look down at verse 22. And I saw, I'm sorry, at verse 9, then came one of the seven angels, and he said to me, Come, I'll show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.

[6 : 57] 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. It's the new heavens and the new earth.

At the end of all things, at the renewal of all things, we're not being taken away from the world into some other worldly place. Heaven is coming down.

God's renewal is happening here, in some sense. Now, we skipped a lot of the details, both in this passage and we skipped Isaiah 60, because we just, you know, wanted to get out of here tonight, so we didn't read it.

But I'd commend you reading those passages and meditating on the details that are there. John pictures it as a city, a strikingly large city. If you look at the dimensions, it's over 1,300 miles square, like a cube.

It's bigger than the western half of the United States. It's got walls and gates, and these walls are made of precious stones and metals, and these gates are adorned with all kinds of things.

[8 : 06] And it's a place that has buildings, and it's got roads. It has a street of gold in it. It's got a river that goes through the middle of it. The tree of life is there.

Do those descriptions sound like anything, any other place to you? They sound like the Garden of Eden, don't they? In the Garden of Eden, you remember, the tree of life is at the center. There are rivers that converge there.

There's precious stones. God is present in the midst of it. See, the point is, the city, the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth are as real as the Garden of Eden was real.

They're both real, physical places. The story, God's story begins in a garden, and it ends in this city, the new Jerusalem. And just as an aside, I probably should have answered the question this way.

If it's as real as Eden was, you guess what was in Eden? Animals. Probably some cats. You know, if the new heavens and the new earth are that real, then maybe there's hope for Fiesta Kitty.

[9 : 17] I don't know. But it makes you wonder. You know, what kind of a real place ought we expect this to be? Will it be exactly like the world we live in, or will it be radically different?

Well, John's vision shows us both similarity as well as difference. Think about how the city is described. There are walls there.

There are streets. Jesus talks about mansions being there. There are houses. Those things weren't in the Garden, right? The Garden was just nature.

But this is developed in some way. This is not just... The new heavens and the new earth are not going back to the Garden, to the primitive beauty of the Garden. No, it's the Garden plus something.

What is it plus? Well, it's plus roads. That's a human innovation. That's human technology. Buildings.

[10 : 16] The new heavens and the new earth are a place with the garden plus the fullness of human innovation and God-powered achievement. That really kind of blows your mind.

If you think about it, if there are buildings there, what kind of architecture is it? Is it primitive? Is it modern? Is it Baroque?

Is it colonial American? What kind of architecture does it look like? If there are roads, what goes on those roads? What sort of machines might be driving or being pulled on those roads?

It makes you wonder what else from this world of human innovation that God is directing by His word and spirit might we see in the new heavens and the new earth?

Might we see really beautiful landscaping in these buildings? Might we see engineering feats that we haven't even seen yet?

[11 : 16] What sort of food would we see there in literature and art and music will be in the new heavens and the new earth? It's a real place.

Look at chapter 21, verses 24 and following. He says, By its light the nations will walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

Gates will never be shut by day. There will be no more night. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. What is that? The honor of the nations.

Well, the glory of the nations is that human achievement that comes from every culture. The fruit of human achievement will in some way be seen in the new heavens and the new earth.

Now, it's qualified. It's not just a bare, unqualified acceptance of all things human. Verse 27, the very next verse.

[12 : 18] But, nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false. Only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

It's a recognizable place. With things from this world that we recognize. And yet, it is different somehow.

The renewal of all things means that God will refine and perfect and renew and purify the realities which we are familiar with now.

So that they are unstained by the sin which attaches to everything. And twists and distorts everything in our world. The best example of this was Jesus himself.

You remember Jesus after the resurrection, right? After the resurrection, Jesus was recognizable to his friends. They could tell who he was.

[13 : 20] He had the marks on his hands and his feet. If you remember the stories, Jesus ate with his disciples. He still was able to eat. And yet, there was something radically different about Jesus, right?

I mean, he walked through walls. And, you know, he disappeared and reappeared at times. So there was something that was both similar to what we already knew of Jesus.

And yet, it was purified, refined. It was renewed in a unique way after the resurrection. Can you imagine how the new heavens and the new earth will be similar and yet different?

My brother is a photographer. So I was thinking about what would photography look like for him in the new heavens and the new earth? A human technology, will it be there?

What would photography as a discipline look like without the exploitiveness of pornography? Or what would photography look like without the selfish image creation of social media?

[14 : 27] What would photography look like in the hands of someone who God has designed to be an artist with it, unlike me? Somebody who gets the lighting right and the perspective right.

How might, in the new heavens and the new earth, a photographer like my brother be freed up from sin in order to perfectly capture the glory and the majesty of God's creation?

Wouldn't it be interesting that human innovation might just be reflecting the glory of God in the new heavens and the new earth?

That we might be able to taste a picture of God in the new earth? A perfect photo like my brother takes? Might, might could just have a taste of what that looks like now.

And yet so much more to come. So, it's, heaven is a real, it's a physical, it's a perfected place.

[15 : 31] But it's also filled with real people. And it's going to encompass the various groupings of people and nations in the world. We already read verses 24 and 26.

The light of, by its light the nations will walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 26. And they will bring in it the glory and the honor of the nations. In fact, if you look back at Isaiah, Isaiah 60 through, well really 55 till the end of Isaiah.

Isaiah talks about the nations coming. And John uses the word *ethnos* here where we get our word for ethnicity, ethnic. And what he's saying is, is that all the various peoples of the world are going to be represented in the new heavens and the new earth.

In all of their various kinds. Every culture, every people group in the world will be reflected there. There are going to be Zulus and Mongols and Aborigines from Australia and modern Persians and folks from Appalachia.

All kinds of people are going to be reflected in the beauty that is the new heavens and the new earth. And it's fascinating that it isn't just individual souls walking up, you know, one person by person to some sort of table where God's sitting behind.

[16 : 56] But there are nations, people groups coming together. And they're bringing their glory, the glory of their nations to the new heavens and new earth. Their unique contributions to human flourishing.

Did you notice that it said that the kings of the earth are going to be coming? What does that mean? Unlike our current day, I think that you kings in the ancient times were not just protectors of their people and their cultures, but they were promoters of culture.

They're the ones who gave money and gave protection and gave... They furthered culture and they took culture to other cultures. They didn't have social media. So, the kings were the people who brought forth their culture to show it off.

And that's what's happening in the new heavens and the new earth. The kings of the earth are coming and bringing those gifts to God. And so all the nations will come and gather before the throne of Christ in the renewed city.

Not just Jewish people, but all kinds of people. You know, one of the tragedies is that most of us Western Anglo folks, when we imagine heaven, we imagine a lot of white faces really near the throne of grace.

[18 : 22] And then maybe some other non-white people kind of gathered around. My family is Lebanese. That puts us as part of the Canaanite people in the Bible.

My people, my kind of people are going to be in the new heavens and the new earth. We are the outsiders that are now being brought in. Now, at the very front of the throne is going to be God's chosen people, Jewish people.

They're going to look a lot like me. They're going to have large noses and receding hairlines and be kind of squat like me. But there's going to be, the place is going to be filled with those folks at the center and then all the variety of peoples from the world.

It's a beautiful vision. It's a really beautiful vision. So it's a real, physical, perfected place with real and varied people.

And in it, Jesus will reign supreme. Jesus will reign. And wherever you see Jesus reigning, you know what you see with it? You see justice and righteousness.

[19 : 32] And so there are notes of punishment of the wicked here. Look at verse 21, verse 7. He says, 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, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars, their portion will be the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

It's a reminder that in the fullness of God's presence, justice will be revealed. I want to read from Richard Mao's book.

Moo. Richard Moo. Richard Mao. I actually don't know how to say his last name. But I want to read a little bit of an extended section where he talks about the kings of the earth, the nations coming, and God dealing justly with them.

He says this, Thus, the sins that have been committed in political history will be publicly exposed in the holy city. God will not allow such wickedness to go unavenged.

[20 : 38] Political dictators will be led into the presence of those whom they have cast into prisons. Kings and queens will bow low before the widows and orphans they have oppressed. Cruel tyrants will hear the testimonies of those they have martyred.

White racist politicians will wither under the gazes of black children. And the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. The oppressive relationships that have occurred in sinful history will undergo no simple reversal in a transformed city.

No attempt will be made to satisfy our more primitive yearnings for revenge. The goal of this vast and complex political reckoning will be the glorification of God.

The universal recognition that the Lord alone is righteous in His verdicts and swift to do justice. God alone will judge between the nations and decide for many peoples on that day of reckoning.

It reminds me of Paul's Christ hymn that every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow before Christ and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[21 : 52] It's a real, physical place with real and varied people that are coming to God for justice and for right, for things to be made right.

And maybe the most striking feature of this whole vision that John gives us is that God is right there present with them. God is right there.

Look at verse 3 of 21. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. God is coming down to bring His dwelling place to us.

He will dwell with them and they will be His people and God Himself will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither there shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed.

All the varieties of nations will find themselves in the presence of God and when they get to the presence of God, what's going to happen to them?

[23 : 01] They will be healed. One of the best little lines comes from the very end in chapter 22 where it talks about the river of life and the tree of life or the trees we can say because they seem to line the river and every month they make new fruit.

And it says that the leaves are for the healing of the nations. The leaves are for their healing. This vision is incredible because it's this real, physical, perfected place full of varied and healed people.

So what? It's beautiful. It's compelling. I hope that it's true. But, you know, so what? How can this vision of God's renewal, the end of the story, actually be something that touches us?

Who we are now? Well, I think this is where the real power of the passage is. It's descriptive to this point, but there's one piece of description that we really need to see, and that's where Jesus is.

Jesus is the Lamb. It says that He's at the center, and in fact it says, there is no sun because Jesus, the glory of God in Jesus is illuminating the entire city.

[24 : 23] You know what it says? It says there's no night anymore. Jesus is illuminating the whole place. He Himself is at the very center, and it seems as though, because He's at the very center, that He has this, like, attractive quality that it's like people can't help but come to Him, like the Magi following the star in the sky.

They want to simply find out what this light is. The people, the nations are streaming into the city. Everything seems to be gathering around Jesus and His throne.

that the action is where Jesus is. Jesus actually predicted this. When He, in John's Gospel, when He rode into Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, He started teaching, and one of the things that He said was, when I am lifted up, when I am exalted, talking about the cross primarily, when I am exalted, I will draw all people unto Myself.

And this, right here, is the fulfillment of that. That Jesus will be exalted in that day, and He will draw all people unto Himself.

Why is He so attractive in this? Well, because in the light of His glory, it clarifies everything else. It shows forth what is true and what is false in the world.

[25 : 55] It shows forth that, not just the beginnings of the stories and the middles of the stories, but it shows the ends of all of our stories. All the things that are true and right and good.

It shows those things forth. And it, it rejects everything that is wicked and evil. And the reality is, is I think we want to follow that.

I think you want this vision to be true. Whether you are a Christian or not a Christian, whether you are young or whether you are old, whether you are rich or whether you are poor, I think you really, desperately want to believe that the fractures that you experience in this world and in your own life will be healed one day.

That the stories of your life, you know that they don't have a Disney fairy tale ending, but that they will be made right.

That your failures are not the most ultimate thing in the world. That your, the abuse that you suffered is not fatal. That your wayward children will be healed one day.

[27 : 01] That your successes, you know that your successes are not going to be ultimately defining. that the ugly political realities we live in the midst of will ultimately find real justice.

I think you want a world that has that kind of potential and that kind of hope. You know, the problem with the Sunday school lesson that we had, the problem with the, the huge ski mountain was that my vision of what is best wasn't good enough.

It was too small of a vision. What Jesus is, or what John is doing for us right here is he's trying to get you to have a bigger vision, to want something bigger.

He's trying to capture your imagination and your desire. So what do we do with that?

I think this, and I'll close with this. If you were to capture this vision and that the end of God's story, the renewal of all things, if that became your story, if that became your vision, I think you would see two things happen in your life.

[28 : 24] I think you would think differently about your work because you would realize that your work is a part in some shadowed way, in some little way, you are a part of human flourishing in this world that reflects the ultimate renewal that God is going to bring.

It gives dignity to your work. Whether you're doing, you know, pharmaceutical research, or you're short order cook, which otherwise would be called a mom, or you're teaching high schoolers, or you're doing architecture, or law, it gives it dignity to know that everything that you do, every hour that you spend is part of creating this world that honors God and the human flourishing that He will ultimately bring about, that you are working on in seed form.

It will change the way you work. It will change why you work, how you enjoy your work. And the second thing it will change is the way you think about your relationships. Because what it will mean is you don't have to be desperate for those relationships to feed you.

You don't have to get things from those relationships and it will free you to be able to give to those relationships. It will free you to see not only yourself as part of God's grand story, but you'll be able to see other people as part of God's story.

And you'll be able to live for their ultimate flourishing within His story. You know, I think the fundamental thing about this is as we get this vision of God's renewal of all things, we begin to recognize that we get little tastes of it now.

[30 : 23] In our work, in our relationships, this is why we come to the table. This is why we come to communion. Because we come and we get, you know, a little piece of cracker and a little thing of juice.

You know. I used to joke with my kids they shouldn't come to communion because they just want a snack. But we come because it's a taste of the feast, the wedding feast of the Lamb, the ultimate feast that we will have with Christ.

We're getting in a tiny little juice cup. But we come anyway because over time those little tastes change us.

They remind us that we are part of a bigger story, that it will come to fruition one day and we look for it and long for it. Okay.

I should stop there. I want you to taste not just bread and wine. I want you to taste heaven because that's what John is doing for you.

[31 : 30] Okay. Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would help us to taste the fullness of your redemption, of your story that is at work now.

Be with us as we do that, as we turn to your table now. Let us do so with thankful hearts. Honoring you, we pray. In Christ's name. Amen.