The Church and Its Destiny

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[0:00] Well, I invite you to turn to Revelation chapter 21, and it's on page 1041 of the end of the Bible, as Gene said. And maybe if you could also, at the same time, just turn one page back in your bulletin as well.

This is a really wonderful prayer at the top of page 9 in your bulletin that we read. And it's really very, very relevant to our passage today.
Because Revelation 21 is all about hope. And hope is a commodity that is precious, especially in our world today, where many have lost hope.
There is often a sense of despair. And here there is this bright light of hope. And in this prayer, we hear an asking to God for his scriptures to give us hope that we can embrace and hold fast to it.
So you see those words. It says, The gift of hope comes as we hear God's word.
[1:37] The gift of hope we can embrace and hold fast to as we hear about what Jesus has done for us. And Revelation, the book of Revelation, does this in the most amazing way.

Because in Revelation 21, we see the certainty of what is going to come. We are called in this to look up from this race that we're in, the struggle against sin, the work of ministry.
And to look up and to see what God has waiting for us. And so we can embrace that hope. And so I want to look at that in starting in verse 1 of chapter 21 there.
Let's look at our hope. John says, 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.
Meaning that there was no more chaos and death. That's what the symbol of the sea was. You don't have to worry. You people who love the ocean and being on it. There will be oceans. The good things of creation will be there.
[2:47] But that chaos and death where the beast comes from in Revelation, that is completely gone. And John sees the holy city. The new Jerusalem in verse 2.

Coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. It's a picture of heaven coming to earth.
It is a powerful picture of hope. It's an awesome sight. And we thank God because there's not only a picture, which is hard to take in. There's also a voice that explains the picture.
It's a loud voice because they are the eternal words of God himself. And God says in verse 3. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, female and male.
He will dwell with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God.
You see, this is what is new about the heaven, the new heaven and earth and Jerusalem.
[3:59] Finally, God will live with humanity. And his tent, his tabernacle, will be with them forever. That's what it means literally.

They, humanity, will belong to God. Just as children belong to their parents. And they will live out this family life with him forever.
God will be theirs to love and to worship and to live with. That incredible relationship of humans, the created ones, with God the creator, was marred and separated for so long.
But now, it is perfectly restored. All conflict, all suffering and meaningless in life are resolved. And the great power of sin and evil to separate people from God is completely obliterated.
And there is perfect friendship, fellowship, communion with God and with each other, and with all creation. And that's the destiny of the church.
[5:08] You know, that's where we see in our whole sermon series, we started with Jesus' promise that the gates of death would not prevail over the church. And here is a picture of that promise coming to reality.

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It is a picture of an incredible change in relationships. It is the destiny of the church. And this is something that I believe the world today wants desperately.
That kind of change in relationships. Since Nelson Mandela died on Thursday, you see all over the news an incredible praise for him and a deep sense of loss in the mind of the world for what has gone away.
A light, you know, it's often said, has been extinguished. And one of the reasons for that praise by the world is that he represents the desires and the wishes of humanity for peace.
Here's a man who brought reconciliation and a measure of healing into a country that could very easily have been consumed by violence and hatred and broken relationships.
[6:22] But even a man as extraordinary as Nelson Mandela could never come close to creating a lasting, perfect reconciliation and peace.

God alone can do this. God alone will bring eternal friendship throughout creation. And it happens only when he dwells with humanity.
It only happens when they belong to him and when they know him as their God and Father, as his children. And the church's mission, as we've been talking about in this series of the church, is to bring people throughout the world into that eternal friendship with God.
We are God's people helping each other every day in that friendship. And we do that so we can go into the world, as we heard last week, go to our friends and our families and colleagues with this amazing news of Jesus who brings that relationship that relationship we are hearing about in Revelation to everyone who will trust in him.
Jesus is about bringing everybody into that picture of God dwelling with his people. It is a picture that is true. That vision will happen, as verse 5 tells us.
[7:47] It's trustworthy and true. And I think this is a very important vision for us to embrace and hold fast to, as that great colleague says. Because it strengthens our hearts to make disciples of Jesus.

It strengthens us to persevere in our own following after Jesus as well. It is a vision that changes us.
And there's so much to learn from this passage, to take from what it means that God will dwell with humanity.
But I want to, in the next few minutes, just highlight three aspects of God dwelling with humanity and what that means. And the first thing that we see is that it means that God will heal his people.
So look at verse 4. The first thing that the voice of God says will happen when he dwells with them is that he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death will be no more.
Neither shall it be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away.
And what that shows us is that there will be tears in heaven.
[9:00] But those are tears that are momentary. Everyone who comes into the New Jerusalem to dwell with God will have experienced death, mourning, crying, and pain.

It's the very nature of our world. And the book of Revelation is clear that the church, throughout its history, suffers unimaginable things, even more than many in the world, simply because they follow Jesus.
But we hear God say in this verse that he will personally wipe away every tear. And that word every is important because it means he will touch every hurt, every sorrow, every betrayal, every loss, every heartbreak, every injustice, every broken relationship, and every death in every person.
He experiences this pain in a very real way. Just as a hand would feel a tear as it is wiping it away.
Think about the tears that are in your own life.
What has caused tears in you? Think of what has caused tears in the people that you know as well.
Well, God dwelling with you means that he will wipe that away completely and utterly.
[10:31] So much so that they are called former things. And anything that has to do with death or evil or sickness or corruption of creation is completely finished.

And the nature of the newness is that death and pain of any kind will no longer exist. There is permanent protection. It is a healing that is deep, utter, and complete.
There is a wholeness that follows that can never, ever be compromised. And this is the nature of God, that he is a God of healing.
One of the striking aspects of the Gafcon gathering that I was in in Nairobi was the testimony of the people who had gone through suffering.

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Suffering in ways that I just could not imagine. You know, families who were beaten and killed. Kidnapping. The burning of homes and churches.
[11:34] Which was in common with many of the delegates. And I heard many other stories of atrocities that don't make the news. One of the things that happened that was really a moving moment was that the president of the Barnabas Fund, a guy named Patrick Sukdeo, stood up and prayed.

And he is the head of an organization, Barnabas Fund, that supports Christians in more than 50 countries that face discrimination or persecution because of their faith.
And what he did was he led the conference in prayer for millions of Christians who had been displaced in the Middle East and in West Asia and in Africa with their churches desecrated and their institutions destroyed.
And it was an important moment because we saw what God, we were praying for what God will do one day in the most perfect way of wiping away tears from every eye.
And I think it is a very good thing for us to support an organization like Barnabas Fund because we are praying for what God will perfectly make happen one day. But we also work to pray for healing in our lives here in our local church as well.
[12:51] We pray for those who suffer. We bless those who are hurting in our community. We live out a relationship of wholeness and forgiveness. And our church is meant to be a place where we offer safety and healing for the souls of everyone in the city around us.

It is safety and healing that only comes as salvation enters into us by Jesus Christ, our Lord.
The nature of salvation is that wholeness, is the healing of God. Now, the second aspect of God dwelling means that Jesus will perfectly shape your life and your world.
and this gets into the description of the new Jerusalem which is hard to do. I mean, lots of people said, what are you going to do with this passage this week when we were studying it? What are you going to do with Revelation?
But very simply, the new Jerusalem shows that our life and our world will be Jesus-shaped. So if you look at verse 9 at the end, the angels speak to John and he calls the church the bride.
[14:04] He calls the church the bride. And he says, come, I'm going to show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And then what he does is he shows them the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

And so, God is showing John that the church is the new Jerusalem and it is the bride of the Lamb. It is this incredibly massive group of people that God has brought together to belong to Jesus, to be united to Jesus as a husband and a wife are united.
You can see how big that gathering is in verse 16 because that verse tells us that this angel measures the city with a rod that's 12,000 stadia you find out.
Well, that means that this new Jerusalem is immense. It's a cube that's 1,400 miles on every side. Now, Winnipeg is not quite 1,400 miles away.
It's massive. I know it's big. I've tried to explain to my boys. They want to drive there to see their cousins. Well, the longest trip they've ever been to is to Seattle. And it wasn't easy getting there with them.
[15:24] You know, it is a long way. And it's not, this is not a literal cube that we are being shown here. God is revealing that that city is huge.

It's bigger than the known world that John knew about at that time. And so, the world is the church. It is the church at peace with God and with all of creation.
And that's why the number 12 is so prominent in the city. It shows, it signifies the people of God. In verse 12, there's 12 gates, there's 12 angels on the gates, the 12 tribes of Israel.
And then in verse 14, there's 12 foundations with 12 names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. So this is a city that is based on its foundation. It's shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ through which people are brought into that place, through which people are shaped and transformed and made whole.
That's the foundation of the church. And it's striking in this world, this new world, that the word Lamb is used for Jesus over and over again as John describes it.
[16:32] And that's because there's this constant reminder in that city, this joyful place where the redeemed relate to one another. There's a constant reminder that Jesus died on the cross for them.

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That he has brought this immense community together by the blood of his blood sacrificed on a cross. And everyone who enters that city, that new heaven and the new earth, only come in through the Lamb.
And all of their relationships are therefore changed together. And so one of the most exciting things, one aspect I just want to highlight about the Lamb in our reading is in chapter 22, verse 4.
And I think these are five of the most beautiful words in the Bible. In chapter 22, verse 4. Those four verses say, they will see his face.
They will see his face. This is what it means to be in the new Jerusalem. We will see him as he is. [17:41] And that changes us. We will be like him. The deepest desire, and I think this is one of the indications, that you have come to trust in Jesus Christ as the one who saves you.

One of the most powerful indications in our life is that we desire to see God. We want to be with him. We want to see him face to face. And here is this promise that we shall see God's face.
Can you imagine that the deepest desire of our lives will be fulfilled in that city all of the time? The one we worship today, the one who loves us, who has saved us, who we follow and we praise and hold on to, even though we don't see him, we will actually see him one day.
And we can't wrap our minds around this. We can just hold it before us and see that's the substance of our hope. Somebody who spent a long time trying to kind of wrap his mind about this was Augustine, you know, back in the fifth century.
And Augustine said this as he tried to grapple with it. He said, God will be so known by us and he shall be so much before us that we shall see him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in himself, in the new heavens, in the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist.
[19:08] And also by the body we shall see him in everybody which the keen vision of the eye of the spiritual body shall reach. You see, he's trying to grab hold of that realizing what does it mean that God will be constantly with us and that we will be with him.

What does that mean? It means that life will be permeated and shaped completely by Jesus. And you know that word bride is used a lot of the church and it's because it says that there will be a new intimacy with God.
You will see Jesus as he truly is. you will be perfectly known by him and united to him and this will change you. You will be shaped by Jesus. I've done a lot of weddings in the past in my ministry and I'm always amazed by the incredible change that takes place in the bride from the rehearsal to the day of the wedding.
Because you know rehearsal day it's usually pretty stressful and you know nobody's dressed up in any kind of way and they're harried.
People just are not their best. And all of a sudden you come two days later to the Saturday wedding and you see this transformed person coming down the aisle and you don't necessarily recognize that that's the right person coming.
[20:35] That is the reason why bride is used here. It is said there is a massive change that takes place on that wedding day. And the biggest change is that you are entering in a new life.

Just as a bride enters into a new life with the groom on that wedding day. It is a life where there will be a new intimacy together. There is a life where you will be known and will know in a way that you never have before.
And it is a life that goes on and on and on. And this is a life that has a new quality to it. That is why we are called the bride.
There is this gospel shaped life that is before us. And the shape of things to come is the shape of Jesus to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess and who is the lamb who died for us.
And then finally and I want to close with this the third thing that God being present with us means is that he will share his glory with us.
[21:42] He will share his glory. The striking feature about this city that we have seen today is the glory of God. So if you look back at verse 10 and 11 right at the very end of 10 the beginning of 11 you will see there that this city of Jerusalem new Jerusalem has the glory of God.

its radiance like a most rare jewel. And there is a list of beautiful jewels that Gene read perfectly from that Bible reading today. There is a lot of jewels that are listed.
And they correspond roughly to the precious stones that were in Aaron's breastplate, the chief priest as he went into the Holy of Holies, the place where God came from heaven to earth in Exodus.

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But those privileges that once belonged exclusively to the high priest of coming into the very presence of God and his glory are now reflected throughout the entire city.
It's as though the whole city is the Holy of Holies, the place of the presence of God. And that's why there's no temple in verse 22. The temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb it says there.
[22:57] The God and the Lamb are together here, the Trinity, God's glory. And the whole world is filled with that glory as was promised in the Old Testament.

God's glory permeates this place. That's why in verse 23 there's no need of sun or moon to shine on the city because the glory of the Lord is its light and the lamp is the Lamb, Jesus Christ.
So you see the reason for the splendor of the city is because it beautifully reflects the light of the glory of God. The glory of his power, his majesty, his sacrificial love for us, all of that is reflected in this city in beautiful ways.
And the beauty of that city depends on this glory of God to fill it, to be reflected. Now a year ago, after about 11 years of marriage, I decided it might be a good time to buy an engagement ring for Catherine, my wife.
And it is a little late, but I discovered lots of things about how rings are made and what you look for in a ring as well and in a diamond.
[24:11] And it is all about how these diamonds reflect light. They're cut in a certain way so that it happens in the most beautiful ways. and I discovered why they have such nice lights in those diamond shops because they're showing off the diamond in that way.

And the thing about diamonds or any precious stone is it looks like nothing if it's dark. They look like worthless pieces of stone. And this is what the beauty of the church is all about.
It is beautiful only as it reflects the light of the glory of God. That is the glory of the church. That is the glory of the new Jerusalem.
And that's why in the Gloria, in the book of Common Prayer, we give thanks to Jesus for his great glory. And John is thanking God for his glory in this picture.
And that is the great hope that we look forward to today. That one day we will reflect his glory in ways that are unimaginable, beautiful, wonderful, and exciting.
[25:23] And so our question as we leave this passage is how well do you reflect God's glory now? Our vision as a church is that in our life together, we at St. John's will know this glory and reflect it beautifully to each other and to the world around us.

And the new Jerusalem gives us a clue as to what we should be all about now. That we should be about worship, about knowing God as we obey him, about healing the suffering, about becoming Christ-like.
And there's a real call in Revelation here to be passionate about being like Jesus so that we can't take sin lightly when we see both what it cost to Jesus as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world, but also as we look at the glorious future that he provides for all believing people.
There is an incredible attraction about the new Jerusalem. I hope you see that in this chapter. And what that does for us is it helps us, it strengthens us to persevere.
We are tempted to give up, to conform to the values and priorities of this world, to let those things get entrenched in our lives. But this passage shakes us.
[26:46] It plows up the really hard ground, the things that we are entrenched into, and it lifts us to the priorities of this God-shaped world that is before us, the gospel-shaped world of the new Jerusalem.

So as you live in this city, may your life be shaped by the new Jerusalem already. May you keep worshiping Jesus, keep following him, make your life here in the city of Vancouver as you work, as you live out your family life, as you live with your friends, and as you relate to one another, make that life a reflection of his glory that will be your glorious life forever in the new city of Jerusalem. Amen.

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