

All Things New

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[0 : 00] Our Father, we pray that you would enter into our hearts today, that you would teach us not to love those things that are damaging, but that you would empower us to love that which is truly good, even your glory, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please sit down. If you're new with us today, we're going to look at the second last chapter in the book of the Bible, Revelation 21.

And the way that you can tell an insider, a person who's been a Christian for many years, is that they say Revelation singular and not Revelations plural. It's very easy to find. It's about page 241 right near the back of the Bible.

This is the third on a series of sermons on death and dying and the resurrection and the Christian hope. And as we turn to think about beyond history, there is a problem.

How do you explain something to somebody which is completely beyond their experience? I mean, speaking humanly, in one sense, God has a problem in revealing the reality of heaven and hell to us.

[1 : 20] Not only are we blind and predisposed to disbelieve God, but when he speaks to us about eternity and glory and resurrection and new creation, these things are completely beyond our experience.

One of the best illustrations I've heard of this is imagine a woman who is pregnant and there is a baby in her womb, living baby.

How do you explain to the baby in the womb what it is to taste chocolate ice cream, for example, or to see a sunset?

Yesterday at the men's breakfast, we heard a gentleman speak about something of the community that comes about when men go away on canoeing trips.

I've never been on a canoeing trip, but I was surprised at how many guys had. How would you explain to a baby that sense of camaraderie around the campfire after a day of battling with winds and rain?

[2 : 20] How would you explain the feelings of grief at the loss of someone? And that, in a sense, is the problem. The baby's experience is limited.

And the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, show something of God's kindness to us as he reveals to us in pictures and in symbols something of the reality of what's going to happen to you and to me after we die, when this world is brought to an end.

And I hope you can see it's a huge amount of the book given over to the reality of heaven. God does not want us to be ignorant about this. He wants us to fill our hearts and to fill our imaginations with the wonder of these truths.

But before I get to speaking about heaven, I would be less than truthful if I did not point out to you that while the majority of these last chapters speak about heaven, chapter 20 finishes with a warning to us, just as Jesus repeatedly warned us, that there is one other destiny.

And I wonder if you would look back at the last five verses of chapter 20 for just a moment. In 20, verse 11, we read about the great white throne.

[3 : 42] It is the throne of judgment. And in verses 12 and 13, if you cast your eyes down them, every single human being who has ever lived stands before the throne of judgment.

And then we see that the books are opened. The record of everything that we have said and thought and done, and we are judged on the basis of what is in these books.

It's a very sobering scene. But there is another book. It is called the Book of Life. And the Book of Life is simply a record of every person who has the gift of eternal life.

It's the name of those who belong to Jesus Christ, who have been forgiven and washed by Christ. And in a way that just casts aside everything that's irrelevant and everything that's non-essential, we are presented with this truth in verse 14, Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

[4 : 51] It is a terrible word. And it absolutely and perfectly echoes the teaching of Jesus that there are two destinies, there are two roads, there are two futures for every single person here.

We are either in the Book of Life or we will finish in the Lake of Fire. And I wish there was another option that I could speak to you about this morning. And it's in this very serious and stark, even terrifying context that God explains the reality of heaven, or more accurately, the new heavens and the new earth.

And in chapter 21, God gives us three pictures of heaven. Three pictures. It is God's people, God's presence, in God's place.

And let me look at those in reverse order. The first picture of heaven is of a place. Let me read to you just the first four verses again to put them in your mind.

I saw a new heaven, a new earth. The first heaven, the first earth had passed away, 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 a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling of God is with men, with humans.

[6 : 19] He will dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

You know, of course, it's not so much that we go to heaven, but that heaven comes to us. At the end of the world, the new heavens and the new earth, the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes and absorbs this creation, and it is the picture of God, the creator and savior, remaking and renewing and renovating this old universe, and filling it with his glory.

In the first book of the Bible, God creates the heavens and the earth. It's still gorgeous, especially here in Vancouver, even though we fill it with all sorts of disobedience.

And now in the last book of the Bible, God creates a new heaven and a new earth, a place of glory, a place of eternal life and love, where everything destructive, everything damaging, everything to do with death, is done away with utterly.

God does not save us so that we will float around on clouds, playing harps, looking down on this earth. What a boring existence that would be. Just as our bodies will be redeemed and renewed and raised immortal, so will this universe.

[7 : 54] And all that is good and beautiful, all that reflects the face of God in this creation, will be perfected and glorified and intensified in the new heavens and the new earth.

And God has given us a picture of this in the resurrection of his own son, Jesus Christ, from the dead. Very important for us to get this, brothers and sisters. The new heavens and the new earth is not a return to the Garden of Eden.

It's not a restoration of the blessings of the first creation. It is far, far more and far, far better. For the new creation is not just a place of creation and created good.

It is a place of salvation. It is a place where we have been raised from sin, filled with the glory of God.

Now, I think that's one of the reasons, I hope you noticed this as Carl read it. In the second half of chapter 21, from verse 9 onwards, Did you notice that heaven is full of rocks?

[9 : 13] Let me just, just look down at verse 10 for a moment. The Spirit carried me away to the great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most red jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

And then down in verse 18, we get a serious array of precious stones. Jasper, the city was pure gold, clear as glass. Then we have jewels and sapphires and all sorts of other precious stones. And I need to tell you that many of the commentaries play Bible code with these stones, page after page, devoted to the secret symbolic significance of one or other of these rocks.

You know, there's a long argument about how you can get gold so pure it's transparent. But I think that all misses the point. Just keep your finger in Revelation 21 and turn back to the first page of the

Bible for a moment in Genesis chapter 2.

And we look down in verse 10 of Genesis chapter 2 on page 2 and we read, a river flowed out of Eden. This is chapter 2 verse 10 to water the garden and there it divided and became four rivers. [10:30] The name of the first is Pison. It is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah where there is gold.

And the gold of that land is good. And then they name a couple of other precious rocks. In other words, the precious stones that are in our world come from the land of Havilah which, I don't know where it is, but the point is that it's the place of gold that is very good.

And here is the issue. The new Jerusalem doesn't have access to precious stones. It is precious stones. It takes all the best of creation and makes it completely and absolutely accessible all the time.

The most highly prized, the most valuable things in our world, they're just so much of the new creation that we walk on them. The streets are paved with this kind of gold. Take gold for just a moment.

It is still very valuable, isn't it? I understand so. I mean, people still kill for it and live for it. It's so common in the new Jerusalem that the streets, well, they're paved with this translucent gold.

[11:51] I mean, the most precious thing that this world has to offer is quite insignificant in the new creation. And that is because the new city is a place that reflects the direct glory and beauty of God.

The foundations, the things that you can't even see, the walls and the streets radiate the glory of God. None of us is going to get there and be slightly disappointed.

Whatever you hope for, whatever you picture, it is dilapidated next to the reality of the new Jerusalem. And when we get there, we will see that so many of the things that we have lived for here are just shabby imitations of what God has prepared for us.

And it shows how ridiculous it is to live for those things or to endanger our being there just for something like wealth. I just want to finish this first point with this.

It's very interesting that Jesus uses the word paradise. You remember when he's on the cross and he speaks to the thief who is next to him and he says as he dies, today you will be with me in paradise.

[13:03] It is as it were as Jesus dies on the cross, he is very conscious that in his dying, he is opening the door for us and preparing the place for us. Don't be conned by those who tell you that heaven is just a state of mind, pie in the sky when you die.

The first picture of heaven in Revelation 21 is of a place. I need to move quickly to the second. The second picture is of people. And the key here is verse 3, the loud voice saying, behold, the dwelling of God is with humans.

They will dwell with him. Sorry, he will dwell with them and they shall be his peoples, plural.

Heaven's not just the dwelling place of God, it's the dwelling place of God's people.

And the symbols in the city demonstrate that it's the people of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. You see in verse 12, we read that the twelve gates, on the gates of the name to the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel.

And then in verse 14, there are twelve foundations and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And then there are these absurdly high walls, completely extravagant and unnecessary because every enemy has already been done away with.

[14:26] But the life of heaven is supremely social and communal. I need to say this to you, it's not the flight of the alone to the alone.

Our personalities are not absorbed into the divine being. Each of us as individuals, if we belong to Christ, are raised and made glorious.

And I take it that's why in the last verses of the chapter, the nations bring their glory as heaven is the place where the people gather. But I think it's at this point that God warns us again and I need to read to you verses seven and eight.

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

Here again, God speaks of two destinies and two different kinds of lives. And I find it stunning that at the head of the portrayal of those who are in the lake of fire is the sin of cowardice.

[15:47] It's not those who are fearful, but those who worship what makes life comfortable. those who in their decisions in life take the easy way and use fear as a pretext for compromise.

Very interesting. You go through the list of sins and it demonstrates how important it is to take our values from God's word and not from the culture. I think cowardice is fearing the wrong person. It's placing self and safety above the Lord Jesus Christ who said this to us. Jesus said, whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and forfeit your life? What can you give in return for your life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with his holy angels.

But in verse 7, those who enter into the new Jerusalem are called those who conquer. And if you've read the book of Revelation, you will know that when Jesus writes those seven letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, at the end of every one of them, he calls the Christians those who conquer.

[17:12] And I think it's a reminder that it is not easy to follow Jesus in this world. It's much easier to follow the crowd or even to selectively follow Jesus. But those who conquer are those who refuse to give in, those who refuse to treat sin as if it was okay.

It's a call for courage. It's a call for us to move forward, to be loyal to Christ no matter what it may cost us in the short term. Because the city, the new Jerusalem, is a holy city.

And in that place, God's people share intimacy with him, the holy God, where he wipes away all that's evil, every tear from our eyes and all the causes.

And when God makes all things new, that includes you and me, he will not have the new heaven and the new earth marred by sinful people. You and I will be transformed to be the kind of people that in Christ we so long to be.

Utterly truthful, utterly kind, utterly loving, knowing one another in the presence of God. And if the first picture of heaven is place and the second is people, the third is the most important and that is the presence of God himself.

[18:27] The biggest announcement in Revelation 21 is not of a new heavens or a new earth. It's not God's people will be there, but it is this, that God himself will be immediately, permanently, unmistakably present to all of us.

That's what the loud voice in verse 3 is saying. That's why he says with three times, can hardly contain himself. He says the dwelling of God is with humans.

He will dwell with them. God will be with them. And each of us will have the inescapable and unhindered and unbroken access to God in all his beauty, in all his creativity, in all his holiness and majesty and goodness and power.

that's why the city is described as a cube. I wonder if you noticed that in verses 15 and 16. It's a cube of 12,000 stadia in length and breadth and height.

There's only one other object I know of in all of Scripture that is a cube and that is in the Old Testament, in the temple, the Holy of Holies, at the heart of the sanctuary. That is a cube.

[19:51] And do you know only one person went in once a year who was the high priest. He went in behind the curtain. Do you know they tied a rope around his leg in case he died in there because they couldn't go in.

Here is the city and it's a picture of the presence of God, the absolute presence of God. And because it's a cube, you don't have to go to the suburbs or you don't have to go to the center to meet with him. God is everywhere. It's amazing too what commentators do with the 12,000 stadia. Most of the old commentators translate it into miles. 1,500 miles. And then they point out that's the distance from London to Athens. Cubed.

So there's room for everyone. Which I think is inventive. My view is that the numbers are symbolic. I mean, you've got a wall that is 1,500 miles high and 70 yards wide at the base.

It's not a very accurate architectural measurement. Why are we given these measurements? We're given them for two reasons. The first is, I think they're meant to blow the mind.

[21:00] To show that God's plan is bigger and more wonderful and more imaginative than even we can imagine. I hope you don't limit God to your imagination. I think that's part of the lesson here. And that everything in this new heavens and new earth is filled with such a glory and a splendor that it defies description.

And it means that our lives and our world and all of history have a goal and it's a spiritual goal. To live in the presence of God and to reflect His beauty. To live in a place that's more beautiful than this creation.

More beautiful than we can imagine. Not just physically but spiritually and in truth. And I think the other reason we're given all these measurements is to show that this is not a vague, fuzzy fantasy. Every brick and every yard and every person has been perfectly and beautifully and supernaturally placed there by God. Brought in deliberately by Him. And God is immediately present to every part of the city.

That's what it means in verse 6 when He says, I'm the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life freely. There is no need that we have that will not be satisfied in that city.

[22 : 19] All our fragility and frustration and fruitlessness is overwhelmed. God Himself is the fountain of life and the water of life. Life, life. It's life in the fullest sense of that word.

Life that will be beyond the threat of every sin and everything destructive. Life that is eternal and freely given because we will be immediately and physically joined to God.

This week, Bronwyn and I succumbed and went to see the final Star Wars film. I apologize. It's a confession. We have teenage sons. Forgive us. One of the things that has so struck me in Hollywood films is the portrayal of heaven which is almost always utterly and entirely godless. That is heaven is without God. People get what they want but God's not in the picture. I've always wondered in George Lucas' world what happens when you die? And the answer came this week from the lips of Yoda.

He said, death is a natural part of life. When you die you are absorbed into the force nothing to be afraid of. And every now and again if you watch the Star Wars films some of those who have been absorbed into the force make some sort of ghostly appearance smiling in that sort of detached way it's pathetic really.

[23 : 44] Because there's nothing that comes close to this vision of heaven. And I don't want to steal the thunder from Revelation 22 but I want to show you that at the very heart of the vision is this little phrase in chapter 22 verse 4 which says they shall see his face.

The face of God. I don't know if you know this or not but underneath your deepest desire and longing is the desire to see the face of God.

This was what you and I were made for. And it will only be realized completely in the new Jerusalem when faith will be turned into sight. Because his face expresses who he truly is.

And we will see him and we will know him the source of our life the source of our joy. That is where we find fulfillment and the reason for being because he is unmistakably and directly present to us. We shall see him face to face. There is a great deal we don't understand. There is a great deal in our lives now that is confusing.

[25 : 04] But here the Lord Jesus Christ gives us three pictures of heaven as place and people and presence of God. And I want to finish with two questions. And I want to encourage you to take these two questions as an exercise.

The first is about this world. The second is about the next world. The first question is this. What does this world offer?

That is, is there anything that this world can offer us which is worth throwing away our eternal inheritance in heaven for?

Do you not think it would be a massive tragedy to miss out on this promised future for some pleasure or some shabby treasure or through lack of courage?

Do you remember in the Old Testament Esau who gave up his inheritance, who gave up his birthright for a cup of soup? Well, if you gained everything that this world could offer, if you could live for a thousand years here with all the fortune and all the fame this world has to offer, it doesn't come close to a cup of soup in comparison with one day in the presence of God in the holy city.

[26 : 23] I know the easy life is very tempting, but to wander away from Christ is madness. Secondly and finally, what does the next world offer?

Last year, you as a congregation for our 10th anniversary here at St. John's gave Bron and I a trip to Paris in France.

We haven't done it yet. We are planning it for next year as a kind of wedding anniversary. My sister and her husband, who are both friends as well as being family, can't always say that, but in this

case it's true, they were married on the same day that we were a few years earlier. They are going to join us somewhere in the French countryside. My French is better than theirs. Believe that or not. We phone each other weekly with French accents and we're looking at websites and looking at pictures and part of going there is the looking and the longing and the talking about it.

And I want to ask you, does the thought of being free from sin, does the thought of living in face-to-face fellowship with God fill your hearts with joy? I mean, does the work that God has begun in you now rise up with longing for that day when we hear about these things?

[27 : 51] Does your imagination fill with hope as you think of seeing God's God face-to-face? You know, the one who loved us, who gave his son for us, who promises to give us freely from the tree of life.

does the thought of the glory and grace of God overwhelm you? Because I think that is what it means and that is the sure mark of having our names written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.