

Surprising Hope: The Lamb's Glorious Urban Garden

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Date: 26 February 2017

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[0 : 00] Thank you so much, Aaron, for the privilege of preaching this peach of a passage. I've actually been here for at least some of the series, and I've enjoyed all of your expositions, but it is wonderful.

I often get asked to preach at churches because it's Hebrews 6, you know, or 2 Peter 2, but to be asked to preach on a wonderful passage like this is such a privilege.

I actually enjoy preaching probably at my home church more than any other church, so it's lovely to be here and to worship with you. Let's look at this lovely passage.

If you keep your Bible open, that will be helpful. You know, reading this passage seems a little like taking a sneak peek at the last pages of a good novel, only in this case it's the page of the mother of all sagas.

You know, often people take a sneak peek at the end of a novel because they're so discouraged at what's happening to the characters in the middle of the story. I remember actually having to put *Oliver Twist* down as a boy because I just couldn't get over the sadness when he was falsely accused of stealing something and ended up in a bad place again.

[1 : 11] I actually put it down. And I couldn't handle the sense of injustice of that moment, or the sadness of the circumstance. It was just too much. And if only I had checked the last chapter, I might have kept reading.

Oliver finds he has an aunt. Oliver the orphan has an aunt. Rose Mailey, who marries her longtime sweetheart, Harry, and Oliver lives happily ever after with a kindly gentleman who has been his savior, Mr. Brownlow.

You know, in human history, there have been many dark sections in the narrative. Perhaps the darkest is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Son of God.

In our personal lives, there often are dark seasons. I believe that taking a sneak peek at the end of the end can help us discover a surprising hope.

So my message tonight is called *Surprising Hope, Discovering Surprising Hope, the Lamb's Glorious Urban Garden*. Now, Revelation 21, along with chapter 22, actually provide a glorious conclusion, not just to the book of Revelation, not just to the New Testament, but to the whole Bible.

[2 : 25] Let's start with the book of Revelation itself. First, these last two chapters together function like a bookend to the book of Revelation answering to the first chapter. So the prologue in chapter 1, verses 1 to 8, is answered by the epilogue in chapter 22, verses 6 to 21.

That's true with both respect to the liturgy as well as to the content, the prophetic content of those passages. So, for example, the title Alpha and Omega is used for God in both passages.

It seems to be oriented towards who Christ is in particular in the last passage. God and the Lamb together are the Alpha and the Omega. Another repetition of themes in that early prologue and picked up in the epilogue are the words with reference to the second coming of Christ.

Look, He is coming with clouds and every eye shall see Him, chapter 1, verse 7, chapter 21, verse 2, the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

In similar fashion, the vision of the majestic Christ walking among the seven urban churches in chapter 1, verses 9 to 20, seemed to foreshadow the presence of God and the Lamb in the new city, chapter 21, verse 1 to chapter 22, verse 5.

[3 : 45] Furthermore, promises of deliverance made to the seven churches and to the martyrs of chapter 7 are now fulfilled in the new creation, the new Jerusalem of chapters 21 to 22.

If the title of this great book of Revelation might be something like, Following the Lamb into the new creation, as Michael Gorman suggests, the way of the Lamb followed by the faithful throughout the book is vindicated in these last two chapters.

As Gorman states, Second, with respect to how these chapters function, in the New Testament, so we've looked at how they function in Revelation, but secondly, in regard to the New Testament, they reveal that the incarnation of God in Jesus, which is where the Gospels begin, is now reenacted with God and the Lamb dwelling with humanity forever.

If salvation, as summed up by the church fathers, might be described as, God has become one with humanity, in order that humanity might become relationally one with God, then that salvation has reached its fulfillment here in Revelation 21 and 22.

These chapters also bring to fulfillment the notion of the kingdom of God, which was inaugurated by the presence and saving work of Jesus, as narrated through the Gospels.

[5 : 35] The throne of God and of the Lamb and its irresistible sway in new creation tell us that the kingdom which had come, but was not yet fully come between the resurrection and the second coming of Christ, is now fully come in Revelation 21 and 22.

Christ is truly the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. But thirdly, the whole of divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures is climaxed here in a threefold way.

And there are three concepts that I want to share with you tonight that reflect the content of this passage and which bring together in a climactic way the three great themes of the Christian Gospel.

The whole Christian story lands in this great section. Number one, creation. Number two, covenant. And number three, the community of the people of God. Here in each of these we will discover surprising hope.

Our hope lies, first of all, in a new creation as it's been brought to culmination in this climactic biblical text. The grand narrative that began in Genesis with creation is capitulated here in new creation in Revelation 21.

[6 : 49] This passage is the culmination of creation. The garden into which the first Adam brought curse and death in Genesis 3 now in Revelation 21 has become an urban garden in which the last Adam presides, where it seems that people from all of history who have expressed faith in Jesus Christ now live in a state of flourishing and peace and with no suffering.

It is a new order of things which is hard for us to grasp even given that at least for animals and plants death is part of the cycle of life. The climactic words in verse 6, he said to me, it is done.

Our powerful words. I wonder where else you heard those words. It is done. It is finished. You heard them on the cross. This means that the creational act of God has been brought to completion.

That which Christ accomplished by way of his work on the cross, which affects both heaven and earth, his reconciliation of all things, now comes to fruition in this wonderful passage.

And it's expressed through these words, it is done. Now the new creation has continuity as well as discontinuity with the old creation. In Christ, who came into creation as a human person, there has been a reversal of the curse on creation, enabling the transformation of the old creation into the new.

[8 : 12] So the new creation is not an ex nihilo creation. It's a transformation. I'm so glad of this concept of the new creation that climaxes here. Just last Wednesday night, my class on theology and science was listening to a video on the Big Bang Theory by David Wilkinson, who is a professor of physics and Christian theology at Durham University.

When he was asked during the question time after his talk what the future looked like for the cosmos in light of its past and its current state, Wilkinson stated that the future of the universe, as it continues to expand, seems to involve not the big crunch, but more like the big freeze.

As it expands over billions of years, it will get colder and life will not be able to survive in it. It will be called a futile universe at that point. But then, Christian that he is, he injected these wonderful words of hope.

He says, but I'm not too worried about that because of the new creation. There's a need for a new creation which will come through the return of Christ. It will be brought to fruition there.

He will keep it from freezing. There will be no more death. A new order of things will happen. A creation transformed, not made out of nothing. The Lord Jesus Christ has, in the middle of history, taken on flesh, died and risen again, and his resurrection is not just our salvation.

[9 : 39] It means the reaffirmation of all creation. The description here of the final vision of the completion of the grand narrative in a new creation is culminative also in the sense that its content is actually echoing very similar language all through the Old Testament prophets.

Let me just give you one example in Isaiah 65. John is building on what he's already heard in the Old Testament. Isaiah 65, verses 17 to 19. See, I will create new heavens, a new heavens, and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create. For I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people.

The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. It's almost exactly like Revelation 21. The only shift is that when John interprets that passage, the new Jerusalem is now the bride of the Lamb.

That's the added New Testament perspective which refers to all the faithful in Christ who have conquered the beast and instead of an actual temple, God and the Lord are in fact the temple.

[10 : 51] So we've spoken about creation. We have a surprising hope because God is renewing his creation. There is a new creation to come. But secondly, one can't read this passage and not hear the language of covenant.

There are allusions to covenant that express another revelation-ending climactic peace in this, our text. This passage is about the culmination of God's covenant with humanity. We discover surprising hope when we hear the language of covenant coming to its fruition.

When you hear the words and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride, that's covenant language right there, beautifully dressed for her husband but even more explicitly.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. And again in verse 7, those who were victorious will inherit all this and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Here you are hearing echoes of God's expression of gracious covenant that has happened right throughout the biblical narrative and lands here in this ultimate expression of it. You go to Exodus chapter 6, verse 7, you'll hear God say, I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.

[12 : 06] You hear it in the song of songs. My beloved is mine and I am his. I am my beloved's and he is mine. You hear it in Ezekiel 37. My dwelling place will be with them and I will be their God and they will be my people.

You hear it in Jeremiah chapter 31 and the writer of the Hebrews in the New Testament picks that up and he says, but in fact, the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one since the new covenant is established on better promises.

Jesus, in his earthly life, became God's covenant partner. God looked throughout history for a covenant partner who would be faithful.

He finally found someone in his own son, Jesus of Nazareth, who becomes God's covenant partner on our behalf. The only one able to keep it. The covenant gets truly and fully fulfilled only in him and in all who rest in his faithfulness.

The faithful community in Christ is here depicted as the bride of the Lamb which leads us in just a minute to the third aspect of this great biblical narrative and its closure in the concept of community.

[13 : 16] But I just want to stay for just a moment with this concept of covenant. It's such a rich concept. What does the new covenant involve? Four things, very briefly. There are sins and iniquities I will remember no more.

Because Jesus has been a faithful covenant partner on our behalf and has shed his blood for us, we may delight in the remission of our sins and that gets fully reassured for us on the final day.

Secondly, I will write my law on their hearts and that depicts a transformation, a renovation. So remission of sins and renovation of heart which will finally come to fruition.

All of us struggle as Christian people to grow in Christ. We feel as though many times in our lives we take one step forward and three steps back. Yet we have this great hope, this great assurance that one day we will be made whole.

We will be made holy. And the one who has died for us, who has already perfected us, is making us holy now. And that will reach its climax.

[14 : 21] Our renovation will be complete. So the remission of sins will be fully assured. Our renovation will be complete. Perhaps most importantly, however, it says, they shall all know me from the least to the greatest.

Relationship will reach its climax as well. I will be their God and they will be my people. We'll be more than just a profession, more than just a protestation of a gracious God.

But we as the people of God will know Him and this will be a delightful day when we'll enter into that amazing reality. Thirdly, creation, covenant. But both creation and covenant involve a community that will occupy the new creation and that will live into that covenant.

The text says, there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people.

And He will dwell with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. Of course, creation and covenant come together in God's community. His people who He has always loved in both the era of the old covenant and the new.

[15 : 39] These people are the new humanity and they are at the head of a new creation. That is, they are the head of that new creation in Christ, the last Adam, as God had first intended.

And they are the people who have come under God's gracious, unconditional covenant of redemption and grace. They are above all the people who have entered into the good of the covenant that God made in eternity past within the Godhead to be for humanity.

A covenant involving the Son becoming our Redeemer, becoming flesh incarnate in order that He might redeem a people, a bride, a creation. The mention of a bride immediately conjures up the notion of covenant rather than contract.

God will never break His covenant. We are His bride. But who are these covenant people of God? Let's take a closer look to see who He has in mind, this covenant people of God, populating the new creation as the new Jerusalem.

It's depicted by two images. First of all, it's equated with the new Jerusalem, which is a big contrast to the old Babylon that Aaron has been speaking about.

[16 : 47] This God's alternative to the empire of Rome, which with its motto, Caesar is Lord, stood over against the motto of the kingdom, which is, Jesus is Lord.

So we learn that first this community is being described as people of the king, people under the sway of the lordship of Christ. This is not surprising because it seems to me running through the book of Revelation has been this theme that the apocalypse is about allegiance.

It's about allegiance to the lordship of Christ. This image of the new Jerusalem suggests the continuity of the Old Testament and the New Testament people of God.

The city is inclusive of the Old Testament people of God and yet its newness lies in what is expressed later in this chapter, verse 22. All nations are included.

I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The nations, verse 24, will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor to it. It's therefore inclusive of all people.

[17 : 48] So as we think about the community that will be then, this great bride of Christ depicted as the new Jerusalem, it's inclusive of all peoples. This suggests the missional nature of the task of the church now, which is to embrace people of all nations and especially refugees.

This suggests that the apocalypse is not only about allegiance, the apocalypse is also about embrace or hospitality. This is emphasized by the fact that the city has no closed gates, chapter 21, 25.

But if it's inclusive of all nations and all generations of humanity, it must be pretty big. One of the ways in which John conveys that the new Jerusalem is God's alternative to Babylon is in fact its very size, 12,000 stadia.

That's 1,500 miles in length, width, and height, which means that the city, according to Crabill, the New Testament scholar, has a footprint approximately equal in size to the entire landmass of the Roman Empire.

That is large enough to encompass the world as John knew it. Babylon was spoken of as a square according to Herodotus, but John goes further. This is so crucial.

[19 : 01] The city of God is a cube. Probably reflecting the fact that the Holy of Holies was a cube and all the people of God in the New Covenant are priests in that Holy of Holies.

So it would be fair to say then that this summarizes the reality that the apocalypse is not just about allegiance and it's not just about hospitality, it's also about the wideness of God's mercy.

It's universal in His scope. That is, by desire and design, God will have all people to be saved. At the same time, He will not save those who will not be saved, as we're going to shortly see.

And by the way, there is some hell in this passage. The masses of people in the millennia of human civilization is the reason this garden in Revelation is an urban garden, or better, a garden city.

Civilization and urbanization is not wrong in itself, but rather what is problematic is the Babylonian distortions that arise in sociopolitical life as a consequence of idolatry and the sinful human condition.

[20 : 00] Richard Balcom has said it this way, In the beginning, God had planted a garden for humanity to live in. In the end, He will give them a city. In the New Jerusalem, the blessings of paradise will be restored, but the New Jerusalem is more than a paradise regained.

As a city, it fulfilled humanity's desire to build out of nature a human place of human culture and community. The idea of a cube and its association with the temple, which is here the immediate presence of God and the Lamb, conveys another striking feature of this future aspect of eschatology, which is, that is the end things, which is that the boundary between heaven and earth disappears and all becomes sacred space.

That's probably the height of this, the height and depth of this passage. The apocalypse or eschatological life is marked by God's perpetual, perceptible presence.

That's what it's all about ultimately. Heaven is a place of the presence of God. A state of permanent incarnation, so to speak. Notice that heaven comes down to earth.

So this is in fact the most significant characteristic of the New Jerusalem, divine presence and all its fullness and glory. Oh, what glory that will be. But there's a second image in this passage, not just the New Jerusalem, but we're also the bride of the Lamb.

[21 : 22] This is a metaphor not new to John. Paul has used it in Ephesians chapter 5. It assumes covenant. It assumes love between Christ and his people. We are deeply loved.

But what strikes me here in Revelation 21 is that it comes down from heaven prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

What is most interesting is both its presence in heaven before coming down to earth and the fact that it has been prepared for this moment of revelation or apocalypse presumably by the consummation of the salvation of those who have made it up there through seeing Jesus face to face the beatific vision.

One is of course tempted to see how this fits into various eschatological schemes and you'll notice that's not been the theme of this book of Revelation and quite rightly. You know, a pre-trib we talk about pre-millennial and pre-millennial there's pre-trib and there's mid-trib and there's post-trib and then there's post-millennial and then there's amillennial someone who said it's a pre-posterous business.

So I don't want to go there but I simply want to say that almost any view you can take of that kind of millennial thinking involves ultimately the saints who are glorified coming with Christ down out of heaven we are not our destiny ultimately is not up there it's down here heaven comes to earth this is what's so crucial so the people of God are described in these two images they are depicted shall I say by these two images but they're also described what is this community they are those who have found and now continue to find the satisfaction of their thirst in Christ the water of life over against those who satisfy their deep soul hunger and idols and counterfeits which is most of this book so beautiful to read those words to the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life that's what characterizes people who are part of the people of God they know their thirst but they know where to go for their thirst they've gone to Christ and they've satisfied they've deeply slaked their thirst in Jesus who said come unto me out of your innermost being shall flow rivers of living water and they're also known so they're depicted by images but they're described by two things they know where to satisfy their thirst and secondly they're faithful these are those who are victorious who have stood the test of all the conflict that's depicted in this book who have overcome the beast and the narratives of the secular city have been faithful to Christ they're the overcomers of the beast who have had tears and death for the cause of the gospel and finally they have made it their perseverance is the sign of their true profession of faith that encourages us the people of God to keep on keeping on but if they are depicted and if they're described they're also differentiated and this is the more solemn part of the text the people of God are differentiated over against another community which are headed for another destiny altogether but the cowardly the unbelieving the vile the murderers the sexually immoral those who practice magic arts the idolaters and all liars they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur this is the second death thanks Aaron is this a literal conscious hell which is the heritage of the Puritans and some of the reformers or is this just a reference to the grave and annihilation or might the open gate suggest that all will one day enter hell is a very scary word

[25 : 17] I remember my first wife telling me a story that she had been to Sunday school and the theme of the Sunday school had been the devil and she and her sister were they liked to sort of do a little preaching exercise after lunch and Margaret was waxing eloquent about the devil and Sharon my wife said but who is the devil Margaret and she said I don't know but steer clear I don't know but steer clear of him and so with regard to hell there are many questions I want to encourage you to steer clear of it look rather to this amazing vision look to the Christ who is the center of this vision the Christ who is the one who brings about the new creation the Christ who is the center of the covenant the Christ who is the heart of the community trust in him receive him and make him your Lord and Savior and avoid any possibility of being eternally separated from God or annihilated whichever way you want to think about it this passage might be summarized we thought about creation and covenant and community we might summarize it by looking at the the no statements of this great passage there is no sea in the city you wondered about that what does it mean no sea in the city well sea in the Bible usually represents chaos it's the primeval chaos it's evil it is the opposite of the chaos what's happening now is the opposite of the chaos of Genesis 1 that God overcame by his creation and now has finally overcome in a new creation so I want to say to you for those who are troubled by all of the challenges of life today all the chaos in our world today that there's a coming a day when there's a city that has no sea that has no chaos note there is no death and no mourning no more tears for some of you who may be grieving tonight lift up your heads this is a great day that's ahead of us note there is no sin in the new creation so for those of you who are defeated but repentant lift up your heads he will complete the work of redemption he's begun on you the good work he's begun on you he will complete until the day of Jesus Christ and note this that God has not abandoned his creation it will be transformed not eradicated there are no annihilation of creation texts here and our task in light of Christian hope is to live as embodied persons exercising stewardship of God's creation

Eugene Peterson bemoans that new heavens and new earth is often reduced to heaven and then completely misunderstood he states the frequency with which St. John's vision of heaven is bloated by make-believe into an anti-biblical fantasy is one of the wonders of the world the future is heaven on earth sometimes we have been too heavenly and become gnostic and sometimes we get too earthy and undervalue the majesty of God and of the Lamb out of his transcendence in that day to come and he right adds weight to this he says he calls Revelation 21 to 22 the marriage of heaven and earth the ultimate rejection of all types of gnosticism of every world view that separates the physical from the spiritual it's the final answer to the Lord's prayer which we pray every time we come together thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven note that this passage has all kinds of individual hope for us but it is especially communal and cosmic hope that's before us individual hope for deliverance from death is legitimate hope of reunion with loved ones is also legitimate hope of individual resurrection is legitimate but this picture of realized eschatology is much more about reconciliation of nations and the formation of the one people of Christ who are equal and equally loved and yet apparently still diverse a people living in harmony with God in a whole new cosmos it would be wrong of me to close without talking about who is the ultimate speaker who is the ultimate character in the middle of all this passage the person who is behind the creation the new creation behind the new community and behind the new covenant and that person is described in a very interesting way here

God and the Lamb they all take their meaning creation covenant community all take their meaning from God and the Lamb the incarnation of God and the person of Christ is the very center of this end picture his resurrection in a real human body a real human created body is the reaffirmation of creation and note that in this text God cannot be separated from the Lamb in the new creation God as Trinity is not just how God has revealed himself it's who he really is and God and the Lamb God has become permanently human in Christ the Son never separated from humanity our place of intimacy with God is in the Lamb in this Christ his humanity and what he accomplished in that representative humanity as the Lamb of God will always be the central worship theme forever and ever in eternity then I saw a Lamb looking as if it had been slain says Revelation chapter 5 but actually if you look at the text closely it says then I saw a Lamb looking as if it had been freshly slain it seems that through all eternity standing at the center of the throne standing at the center of the new creation standing in the middle of the new community expressing the new covenant is the Lamb as if it's just been slain he is the center he is the object of our eternal worship worthy is the

Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise