

# Revelation 21-22

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[ 0 : 00 ] Flip to the end and you'll find it. There you go, Revelation 21 and 22. But let me encourage you to turn there, actually, because I want us to be able to see some of the riches that are here for us. You know, I think it's pretty common that as another year ends, we're all taking stock of where we've come and perhaps where we're headed in the year to come.

And I think this is a time when we sort of look over the last year and we start thinking about the story of our life and where that story is headed. But, you know, I think it's very easy as we consider our own stories and the different paths that our life takes, it's very easy to lose sight of where the greater story is headed, the story that God is bringing about in history, and the story that all of us are a part of, whether we realize it or not.

This is the story that the Bible tells. After all, the Bible isn't primarily a book of rules, right? There are a lot of rules there.

There are a lot of commands that tell us how life works best. But at its core, that's not primarily what the Bible is. The Bible is actually essentially a grand narrative, the true story of the world, and more importantly of the God who made the world and where he's taking us.

And of course it matters greatly how the story ends, doesn't it? I mean in the here and now, right? That the future actually shapes our present, doesn't it? At least what we know about the future.

[ 1 : 36 ] We did a lot of driving over the last week. It got me thinking about driving in the car. And you know there's a big difference, right, between driving in your car on the way to a Christmas party or on the way to a New Year's Eve party, right, or driving to the dentist.

There's a qualitative difference in your experience of that journey depending on what your destination is. One's typically pretty joyful, the other is typically fairly dreadful. Sorry, Jonathan.

But it goes deeper than that, doesn't it? Knowing how the story ends changes not just our sort of experience in the here and now, but the meaning of the here and now.

When you know that Romeo and Juliet both end up dying in the end, sorry for the spoiler alert if you haven't read that one, then the whole story, even the funny parts, get colored by tragedy.

And vice versa. When you know that there's a grand resolution of the parts, then even the tragic parts sort of have a different shade and a different color, don't they?

[ 2 : 41 ] In other words, the future helps us to actually understand rightly the present. I think today as Christians, we don't think enough about the future that God has in store for us.

I think perhaps we've become too timid, maybe thinking that if we talk too much about our hope, people will just think that Christianity is pie in the sky, by and by, an opiate for the masses, with no teeth to really change here and now.

I think sometimes we get so anxious to affirm that Christianity is about more than just going to heaven when we die, that we've stopped talking about our hope altogether, including the really good news that we actually go to heaven when we die, Christ.

But you know, again and again, the New Testament calls us to dwell upon our hope. In Ephesians 1, Paul prays this great prayer that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened, that we would know, really know, deep in our bones, in an experiential way, the hope to which God has called us. I wonder if much of our difficulty in living the Christian life here and now is because we don't know, really know, where Christ is taking us. After all, right, the Bible tells us to be people of love, and joy, and patience, and kindness, and generosity, and faithfulness.

[ 4 : 14 ] But most of the time, we think we're on our way to the dentist, as opposed to on our way to the party. And no one's very loving and joyful when they're on their way to the dentist.

But you know, the apostles in the early church understood this dynamic. They weren't ashamed to talk time and time again and to celebrate the future that Christ had won for His people. They knew

that our hope wasn't just the grid through which we could understand the present, but that our hope was also the fuel to help us live rightly in the present.

So with all that being said, let's look then at our hope. The hope that God has in store for us as His people. Turn with me to Revelation 21. Look down there with me. We're not going to read all of these two chapters, just some selections.

Let me read this for us. John writes this. He says, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. This is the beginning of 21. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

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

[ 5 : 36 ] He will dwell with them and they will be His people and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. And He who is seated on the throne said, Behold, I'm making all things new. Skip down to verse 22.

And I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives its light and its lamp is the Lamb.

By its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it and its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there and they will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations but nothing unclean will ever enter it nor anyone who does what is detestable or false.

But only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city and also on either side of the river the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit yielding its fruit each month the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

[ 6 : 58 ] No longer will there be anything accursed but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it and His servants will worship Him. They will see His face and His name will be on their foreheads and night will be no more.

They will need no light of lamp or sun for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever. So what does this stunning picture of our future tell us about life here and now?

A lot more than we could cover in one sitting but for now let me just point to three things as we think about this passage. And the first is this because of how this story ends because of how your and my story ends we can know first that the tears of this life are temporary.

One of the first things we're told about the new heaven and the new earth is what's not there right? Verse 21 chapter 21 verse 1 He says and the sea was no more.

Now I admit that's a pretty strange detail at first right? For us the sea is where we go for vacation and if you're like me you get there and you go and you get a sunburn and it's not really that much fun but my wife likes it so we go.

[ 8 : 16 ] What's so bad about the sea? We have to realize that in the Bible the sea the ocean is often an image of chaos and danger. The ancient Israelites were not a seafaring people.

In fact whenever they needed to cross a body of water God parts it for them and they go across on dry land. Did you realize that? So what John is saying here in a symbolic way is that the confusion and sorrows and tears of this life the oceans of it that we have known on that day will at last be done away with.

As he says in verse 5 God will make all things new. And then there's this incredibly intimate image in verse 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Every tear. every tear of loneliness every tear of regret every tear of grief and loss everyone He says.

The tears everyone has seen and the tears no one has seen and the tears you didn't even remember and the tears you never could forget everyone wiped away.

[ 9 : 41 ] Isn't it incredible that the first thing God does when we're in His presence in the new heaven and the new earth is this. If you know the book of Revelation you know that at this point in the book God has judged the world and renewed the cosmos and descended into the midst of His people and what does this almighty sovereign God do?

He comes like a gentle father and begins wiping the tears away from His people. You see friends there will come a day when our sorrows cease.

He'll wipe them away. When death shall be no more when pain is a thing of the past our tears in this life are temporary.

And I think that means two things for us in the here and now. If the tears are temporary and that means we can face them now with courage. Right?

When pain and sorrows come when grief and loss come as the inevitable do we can know that it's not going to be this way forever. That it's not the last word. That God isn't going to forget.

[10:57] That like a father He will one day wipe them all away. The psalmist says though the sorrows last for the night joy comes in the morning. And that gives us great courage to face our sorrows.

But it also means I think a second deeper thing. As we look at the new heavens and the new earth and as we see that our tears are temporary it means that right now we can trust Him in the pain. After all there isn't a single tear that God permits in our lives that He won't on that day personally wipe away. You know it helps to realize that the book of Revelation was originally written to a group of churches not who were you know holding prophecy conferences and speculating about the last times right.

The book of Revelation was written to a group of churches that were suffering. And as John tells them they're about to undergo a lot more in the days ahead. You see the message of Revelation is a message for sufferers for the afflicted for the persecuted and the weary.

And in the whole book if you were to sum it up God basically says trust me I'm still in control and I haven't forgotten you. And I'm bringing this story to a conclusion so glorious and so good and so fitting that every loss and every tear will be swallowed up in joy.

[12:30] It's just like Isaiah said in our reading earlier he will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.

And Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 looking looking at that same passage in Isaiah puts it this way death is swallowed up in victory. Friends if our tears and our death are going to be swallowed up in victory then we can trust him in the tears.

He's going to swallow them up and make them a part of his redeemed new creation. And in the place of tears there will be joy.

And joy brings us to the next point. The picture that John gives us here of the new heavens and new earth is important not just because of what's not there. There are a lot of things that are not there, right? There's no sea, there's no night, et cetera, et cetera.

But notice what is there. Because of how the story ends when we see what is there we can know that the joys of this life are just a foretaste of what's to come.

[13:45] Now think with me for a second. Let me do a little test. The average person's picture of heaven, what is it? When you think of heaven just right now, what is it? I'm going to read your mind.

We're all wearing togas for some reason. We're sitting on clouds and we've all learned how to play the harp. We're sort of ethereal spirits just kind of floating in the heavens, hanging out, involved in some sort of disembodied church service.

Ugh. It's not very sensory, it's not very dynamic, it's all kind of, well, boring. But, when you read these chapters, and when you read what else the Bible has to say, about our future and our hope, the picture couldn't be more opposite than that.

That where we're headed is not less sensory, but more sensory, and not less dynamic, but more dynamic, and not less real, but more real. If you're familiar with C.S.

Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, it's sort of this allegory of the afterlife, and he sort of imagines there are visitors to heaven, and the visitors to heaven who aren't a part of the new heavens and new earth, as they step and as they walk onto the fields of just the outskirts of heaven, the grass pinches and hurts their feet, because that world is so real, so much more real than they are, that even the grass itself is like sticks poking them through their shoes.

[15:19] Of course, it's just an image, right? But it's a pretty good one. Let's look at how John describes our future. In verse 21-2, we're told it's a city, the new Jerusalem.

So much for ethereal and weightless, right? Nothing can be more concrete and dense than a city. And so much for boring, too, right? I mean, no one in their 20s moves to a city because it's quiet and serene and you can find a nice place with a backyard and a picket fence, yeah?

No one moves to a city because they're just looking for some peace and quiet. No, they go there because there's something always going on. That it's a center of opportunity and culture and energy and creativity and it's teeming with life.

Heaven, John says, is a city. And not just any city, but a city, he says, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband. A city decked out in radiance.

and splendor. The second half of chapter 21 that we didn't read shows us how radiant this city is. And there's this beautiful image, John says, as it's coming down, it's like a rare jewel with light shining into it and sparkling out.

[16:44] And, you know, as this description goes on of this city, it's almost as if the line between this city as a place and this city as the people of God starts to blur.

Is this city the place where we dwell or is this city us coming down where God will dwell? And in some sense, I think John's being intentionally ambiguous.

This city is the place and it's the people. And we're arrayed like a bride, dressed in beauty. You know, one of the neat things about being a minister is that you get to be on this side of wedding ceremonies and you get to see a lot of brides come down aisles.

And it's great. You know, you get to actually see what the groom sees. You get to see the splendor and the joy and the excitement of that moment time and time again.

And isn't it fitting that when a bride comes in, we all stand up? And everyone starts to get a little excited and hopeful. Maybe I'm a romantic. I don't know.

[17:52] Yeah? You know, weddings are one of the most eschatological things that we do as human creatures. It's a great play acting of the final day when we come ushered in to the presence of God, decked out like a jewel.

But you know, it's something more than that, isn't it? When we come to chapter 22, 1 through 2, it seems that this city is also a lot like a garden. There's a river flowing through the middle of the street.

And there are trees growing there. And not just any tree, but the tree of life. Which, of course, takes us back to the beginning of the Bible, doesn't it? To the Garden of Eden. And here, in the midst of this city garden conglomeration, is that tree of life.

bringing fruit and healing to the nations. You know, if a city speaks, if that imagery speaks of beauty and energy, I think this agricultural garden imagery speaks of life and restoration and peace.

And what God began in creation, he finally completes in the new creation. And there it is, the life that he's promised us. Growing like a tree, flowing like a river.

[19:17] For anyone to come and to drink without cost. But it doesn't just stop there. There's a third image that John sweeps up into his description.

In verse 21-3, we're told that God dwells there. Literally, God makes his tabernacle there. And in verse 22 of chapter 21, we're told that there's not an actual temple structure in the city, because God is the temple in its midst.

In other words, it's as if this city garden thing coming down from heaven, it's as if the whole city is a temple, because God dwells there.

It's a city and a garden and a temple all at once. And surely, this last image is the most profound, isn't it? At the center of the city is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.

God dwells there in his glory. And there's no need for the sun or moon. It's as if his brilliance is so bright that the greatest lights we can imagine seem to go dim in his radiance.

[20:30] And night flees away and is made no more. night, of course, being heavily symbolic in scripture, right? Night being our ignorance. Night being our sinfulness.

Night being our sorrow. And yet in the radiance and light of God's presence, a deep knowledge. And at last, holiness and happiness.

happiness. And then, in probably one of the biggest understatement of the whole scripture, in chapter 22, verse 4, we're told that they will see his face.

They will see his face. The one thing that Moses couldn't do, see God's glory. That will be the privilege of everyone in that city.

And then we're told something that seems a bit kind of strange. God's name will be on their foreheads. Which I think is a picture of the union between God and his people.

[21:33] But you know, this beholding God and this increasing union with God, even that is something that's going to be dynamic and progressive and that goes on for all eternity.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a treatise called *The End For Which God Created the World*. And at the end of that treatise, he says, imagine a point infinitely high and imagine us and God excelling towards that same point at a rapidly increasing rate at every moment getting closer and nearer and more entwined.

And he says it will just keep going and going and going and going. After all, who could fathom the depths of God's wisdom?

Scripture tells us that they are unfathomable for us. So you see what that means? As we learn more and more about who God is, as we grow closer to him in eternity, it just opens up further and further and deeper and higher and wider.

That there's no end to the wisdom and to the love and to the righteousness and the goodness that will behold. You know, there's analogies to this in our present experience, isn't there?

[ 22 : 56 ] You know, if you take any expert in any field, say mathematics or music, you know, it's usually the one who's the expert who will joyfully confess that there's much more to be discovered and enjoyed than he or she could ever realize.

That the more they understand, the more they realize that it's just a slice of what's there. And friends, if that's true of something like mathematics or music, how much more true is it of the God who created them both and created every other field of learning that there is?

So the picture that John gives us of this city, garden, temple where at last God is the center of our affections for all eternity with no end shows us that all the joys of this life now are just a foretaste of that unending feast.

The things that we enjoy now are just a shadow of the substance that will be there. Just an echo, just a strain of that ever swelling symphony.

And if that's true, if our joys are just a foretaste, just a mere glimpse of what will be held there, again, I think it means two things. First, it means that the joys that we experience here and now should always be leading our hearts upwards in gratitude and forwards in anticipation.

[ 24 : 35 ] That we should never in this life experience any delight or any satisfaction or any joy without, in some sense, using it to call our hearts forward to that day when we'll behold God's face and we'll fall forever into the depths of the One who is the fountain of all good.

God's face and so when music swells our hearts and when laughter brightens our faces and when the table is set and the chairs are full, friends, it would be a waste of them not to take that experience and to go on and to think of the world to come.

It would be to cut our present pleasure short, to cut short what they're telling us if we didn't experience them and then go on to dwell on the great day when we will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth.

You see, all of our present joys are entryways to true worship. And second, if our present joys are just a foretaste of what's to come, you know, then it means it's okay if we don't experience everything that life has to offer.

It means that you don't need the most amazing job and the most amazing vacation and the most amazing spiritual experiences here and now to be eternally satisfied.

[ 26 : 11 ] it's okay if you didn't get exactly what you want for Christmas, right? There's something better in store. And you know, besides, even if you found the perfect job or the perfect spouse, they wouldn't do the trick.

There'd still be hunger for something more. Because we were made to behold the face of God and to enjoy Him forever. If we find that this life leaves us longing for something more, then it means we're seeing things the way they really are.

Because there is something more. And it's coming for those whom He loves. So John has shown us that our tears in this life are temporary and that our joys in this life are just a foretaste of what's to come.

But finally, we see that the pursuits of this life are a preparation. You know, from what we've seen so far, one might think that in light of the world to come, that life here and now, at the end of the day, doesn't matter much.

If that life to come takes away all our tears and completely engulfs all our present joys, why bother so much with this life here and now? But, John has one last image for us.

[ 27 : 33 ] at the end of chapter 21 and verse 24, we read, the kings of the earth will bring their glory into the city.

And then again in verse 26, they will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. You see, the great gathering of God's people into that city will also be a gathering of all that they've done to his glory.

All the unique ways in which God's glory has reflected itself through countless human cultures and countless human lives will be swept up in the celebration and beauty of the world to come.

That's hard to say exactly what that's going to look like. Perhaps it's hard not to think of the upcoming Olympics and I think 40 days, right? There's a little ticker on the website if you go. Counting down. You know, in the opening ceremony, the nations stream in, each displaying what's unique about their culture. Sort of a triumphant and joyful moment.

[ 28 : 49 ] But that, of course, will be just a dim reflection at best of what will take place in the city to come. When the kings of the nations and the nations themselves bring in their honor and glory.

The way in which God has refracted and reflected and poured himself out on them in all their unique ways. In your unique way. In my unique way.

And then John tells us that the nations will not just gather, but that we will reign. At the end of the passage that we read this morning, John says that we'll reign forever and ever.

Life in the city to come will not be static or sedentary. We will reign. In the original creation, remember what God told Adam? To keep and to cultivate the garden.

That was our original mandate, to rule under God, to be culture creators, to take God's name into the world, and to bring out the sort of latent beauty and potentiality of the world that God has made.

[ 29 : 58 ] And what do we see here in the new creation? We see that in the new creation having been rescued from all the effects of the fall, we take up that creation call once again and bring the glory of God forward into the new heavens and the new earth.

And the lives that we're living now are preparation for that day. when we stream into the city and flow forth raining forever.

And friends, don't you see that if our pursuits now are a preparation for that day, then by all means, they matter. Christian hope doesn't steal the meaning of this life, just the opposite.

It makes life now eternally meaningful and significant. what we do now gets swept up into the world to come that will never end. In fact, it's only a biblical worldview that really gives lasting meaning to our pursuits in this life.

Think about it, if in a million years we're all going to turn to ash when the sun expands and no one will remember a thing about humanity, then maybe there's some short-term meaning to be had.

[ 31 : 22 ] But friend, nothing really matters in the end if that's true. And at best, at best, our work and our acts of mercy and our longing and pursuit of justice and our relationships, friends, if that picture of the world is true, at best, those things are just a distraction from our annihilation.

But that is not where the story is headed. And because our pursuits are a preparation for the new heavens and the new earth, they are rich with meaning and significance.

And secondly, if they are a preparation for that day, then surely that's an encouragement for us to begin shaping and directing all of our pursuits here and now to the glory of God.

That's what matters in the end. Paul says whether you eat or whether you drink, do everything to the glory of God. In other words, the future that's in store for us gives our pursuits a single magnificent focus.

No longer are we doing them for our own sake, but for God's sake. No longer are we going about them to advance our own desires, but to advance what God desires.

[ 32 : 46 ] No longer are we doing them out of a longing to be recognized or remembered or to get the praise of our fellow humans. But we're doing them out of love to God who made us and loved us and redeemed us and with whom we will dwell for eternity.

So let me end this morning with two final exhortations. First, as we consider the future that God has in store, it puts a very serious question before us, doesn't it?

It asks, are you sure that you will be a part of that city? At the end of chapter 21, John makes clear that not everyone will be there, but nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

And you know, the reality is, friends, that we're all trying to get our name into some kind of book of life, aren't we? But you can have your name etched on buildings because you've given so much money to the man.

And you can have your name footnoted in scholarly tome after scholarly tome. Or you can have your name plastered on billboards. Prince is coming to one of the casinos, by the way, in case you didn't notice.

[ 34 : 16 ] I saw that on 95. His only East Coast appearance. You can have your name plastered on billboards. You can have your name endlessly debated on blogs. You can have your name revered on the sports field, and they can raise it up in the stadium, and there it is, your number retired.

But friends, eventually, all of these things will fade and perish. And if that is where we're putting our hope, then we will perish with them.

But if our name is found in the book of life that belongs to the Lamb, if He knows our name, then we will never perish.

Friend, do you have the assurance that your name is written there in the book that never fades before the one who lives forever? Have you placed your faith and your hope in Jesus Christ? He is the Lamb who came to earth and died and rose again so that you might enter that city. We're told that nothing unclean can enter it. So what hope is there for us who are unclean, who have done what is detestable and false?

[ 35 : 37 ] Friends, our hope is the Lamb who came to earth and was crucified and made unclean so that unclean sinners like you and me might be made clean through faith in Him and given access and freedom and joy to enter that city.

Are you sure that your name is in His book? Finally, for those of us who are trusting in Christ, the question is this, how can I be living now in light of the city that is to come?

How can I be living right now? Because that is true. That is the future, brothers and sisters, that Christ has purchased for you.

This is the inheritance that He's won for you. And it is sure and it is solid. Write this down, God says in chapter 21, because it's true.

I'm the beginning and I'm the end. And this is what I've prepared for you. So friends, in the midst of the tears of this life and the joys and the pursuits, keep your eyes on the city to come.

[ 37 : 01 ] Remember who you are and where you are headed. Live now in light of that city.

And I can assure you that it will soften your tears and it will deepen your joys and it will focus your pursuits. And then at last, when we reach that city, as C.S. Lewis writes at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia, we find that all our life in this world and all our adventures had only been the cover and title page, he says.

Now at last, we'll begin chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever. And in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Let's pray together. Oh Lord God, we thank you that you have looked upon us in our hopeless estate and drawn near to us in Christ.

God, I pray for my brothers and sisters here that this hope, as Paul says, would be a burning realization in their hearts.

[ 38 : 31 ] Lord, enlighten all of our hearts so that we might know this hope to which you've called us. God, we want to live our lives now in light of that future. We want to be a people who are bringing that future into the present in joy and in courage and in passion.

God, make us so by your spirit. And Father, I pray for those here this morning who, Lord, don't know you, who are far from you, who are uncertain whether they are indeed in your book, as you say, your book of life.

God, I pray that by your spirit you would get a hold of them and open their eyes to see the beauty of Christ crucified, our Lamb. God, would you call forth in them faith and repentance and hope in him.

God, help them to see that this hope isn't just pie in the sky, but it is a certain and sure future that you have purchased for your people. God, make it so for your namesake.

Amen.