

The Final Chapter, Pt. 2—God Dwells With Man
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One of the most discouraging moments in Israel's history—the great king Uzziah had died, the economy was unstable, the political boundaries were shaky, and the nation couldn't see the future. And they were concerned. And a prophet named Isaiah spoke to 'em. And one of the things he said was

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard; it has not entered into the heart of man what God has planned for those who love Him.

Many centuries later, a time when it was a prideful moment in church history, at least for one particular church. The church at Corinth was very confident about what it knew. It knew its theology well. It knew the present situation. They had a grip on it, and they were confident about their understanding of the future, and they were very proud of their wisdom, and their insight, and their understanding. And the Apostle Paul writes to them in 1 Corinthians, and he says, 'Wait a minute. You don't know the half of it. It has not been seen by human eye. It has not been heard by human ear. It has not entered into the heart of man what God has planned for those who love Him. Whether confused about the future...and it seems dark...or proudful and confident about your grip and certainty of it, I tell you you don't know the half of it. Truly, what God has prepared for those who love Him has never entered into your heart. You can't see it and you can't imagine the wonder of it. It goes beyond anything you could think, you could imagine, or you could ask.'

The book of Revelation is consistent with that, and our reading today is gonna reflect that truth. And if you turn with me to the book of Revelation, chapter 21, I'm gonna read the opening eight verses of the final vision found in the Scriptures. And this vision comes at the very end of a long, long story of God's grace being worked out through human history. And we come to this last part, and we're only gonna be able to read the introduction to this vision, the first eight verses. And we'll go on through the rest of chapter 21; it'll go on into chapter 22. All we're gonna do today is look at and address and pick up on the introduction, the first 8 verses where the Apostle John...the last of the...the elder of the apostles, the last one left alive...as that first generation of Christians is passing away, God gives him a vision of the future. And he has had many different pictures and scenes of that that he's written of throughout the book of Revelation. And now we come to the last part. In chapter 21, beginning at verse 1, it reads like this.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murders and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

It's intriguing to me...you come to the end of the long Bible story, and what you have is a new beginning. You come to the final chapter and everything starts anew. We started looking last week at how the Bible closes, and we saw that in the end Jesus returns, all are raised, and all are judged. There will be justice in the end, and there will also be grace and mercy. And we looked at that last week, and all those things come together in what is called the Great and Final Day of the Lord. And what flows out of that, what comes after that, is the wonder of Revelation chapter 21...a new beginning in which all things are renewed. All things are made new. The text says that "*I saw a*

new heaven and a new earth.” Now, the idea here isn’t ‘we had earth 1, now we have earth 2.’ The idea is there’s a renewal, and what once was is transformed and becomes something new. The picture in the prophetic writings is dramatic—of a purifying fire and a renewal that goes beyond our imagination. One way to picture it, though, if you want to think of it this way is like a caterpillar that, in end times, goes into this cocoon, and everything takes place and out of it comes this bursting-out, new, unbelievable, amazing wonder! That’s what the new creation is like... something totally new. And it’s total. It’s a new heavens and a new earth.

The text tells us, as it goes on to describe this new creation, John says, *“I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven.”* And this becomes the centerpiece of that new creation, that new heaven, that new earth. And it’s so dramatic and it’s so central to everything that the rest of chapter 1 will begin to expand on it and on into chapter 2. And the picture of it goes beyond our comprehension. There’s dramatic symbolism, and there’s dramatic pictures that stretch us as we try to comprehend what is this city gonna be like? The intriguing thing to me is it comes down from heaven. It is not a city built on the foundations of earth. It comes down. And when you read the visionary pictures of it that follow later as you go on in Revelation, the last chapter, you’ll discover that the thing that makes this city so special, beyond all the wonders that are described and all the beauty that is there, the thing that makes it unique and really special and really stand out is the fact that the throne of God will be in that city. It’s not a vacant throne. God will sit on that throne, in that city, with His Son Jesus, the Lamb who was slain and raised to live forever.

That becomes the focal point of the next verse as John continues with his prophetic statement and description. He goes on and says *“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men.”* And he goes on and says *“...and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.”* Don’t miss the repetition here. Repeated three times is that idea...God is gonna be among men, He’s gonna be among them, He’s gonna be among them. He’s gonna be with us! The picture here is not of God taking us up into heaven. The picture of eternity is God coming down to be with us, to live with us, and to be among us. Heaven is not your home. Heaven’s not your home. It’s a place you may pass through if you die before Jesus returns. Our ultimate home is a new heaven and a new earth; and on that new earth God dwelling among us, with us, because He chooses to be there with us. He’s there.

There’s things that won’t be there. The passage says that He will wipe away every tear, and I stop right with that phrase because it is so personal and so special, and it’s something that I think is deliberately put there for us to stop for a second. It doesn’t say He’s going to send out the angels to wipe people’s tears. He’s not gonna task that out. **He** will wipe away every tear. And it goes on to say that there’s not gonna be any longer any death, any mourning, any crying or pain. The first things have passed away. A little later on, in fact the last verse in this section, he will go on to describe something else that won’t be there. He’ll say, *“But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murders and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars,”* they won’t be there either. Don’t read that as a warning. There’s other passages of scripture where there’s calls to repentance and to turning that says things like this, and there’s a warning tone to them. But don’t read it as a warning here. I’m convinced by this time in Scripture what we’re reading is a promise, and that new heavens and that new earth where God is dwelling among us there will be no one who doesn’t have the courage of their convictions. There’ll be no one committed to vile and abominable things who do not value the lives of others, who do not respect the boundaries that are set by God. There will be none of those who want to...who try to control the spirit realm on their own. There’s gonna be no one there who says, ‘This is what I think God is like!’ and make Him in their own image. That’s a promise. A new heavens and a new earth...when someone speaks you’ll be able to trust every word they say.

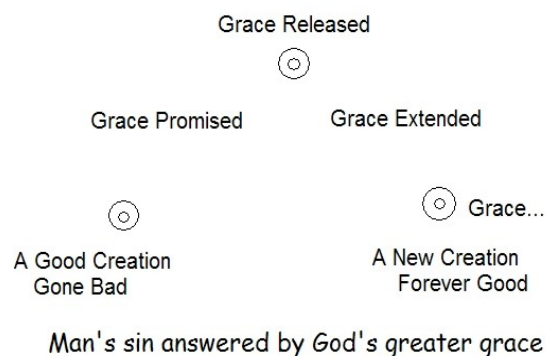
Dramatic scene in a documentary...a photographer for the British Broadcasting Corporation had gone into eastern Africa with a film crew, and he was one of the first westerners to get into this area that had been ravaged by ethnic violence. And he came into this village, and he was very much on the leading edge of the news. In fact, he was way ahead of other reporters and stuff. And he got into this village, and his film crew, and they’re filming the footage and they’re just seein’ the devastation and the death and the horror of what went on in that village. And he comes to a point...and it’s not scripted, it’s not planned...he comes to a point where he just sits. And he’s talkin’ to the camera, and he’s describing how he’d grown up going to church, and he’d been taught to believe and to trust in Jesus, but he had gotten way away from that and he hadn’t prayed in years, and he hadn’t thought about church in years. It really was just faded in the background; it really didn’t mean that much to him...until he walked through there. And he looked at the camera and he says, “The only thing I can say is ‘Thy Kingdom come.’” We want this. Our hearts want this.

There's other things that aren't there. One, verse 1, says there's no longer any sea. All my commercial fishermen and kayakers have a problem with this. We're gonna come back to it later, 'cause there's somethin' else I wanna address first.

We go through this, and really it's so brief. Eight verses; after all these pages, eight verses stretched to the limit of human imagination try to give us a glimpse of the future, of the new creation. The next verse and a...chapter and a half will stretch us even further when we try to grasp what that city with God living in it will be like; and it's full of visionary image and symbols that just take us beyond anything we can fully get our minds around. And yet we look at it and we have so many questions, and we see this description, and it takes us beyond anything we can imagine; and yet we know it's gonna be something really wondrous. And the question that comes to mind...what are we gonna do there? Or what's gonna be going on? And there I have to go to I think it's my all-time favorite verse of the future. It's the Apostle Paul writing the church in Ephesus. And it's a group of believers that were in a very powerful city that was devoted to a pagan goddess. And this pagan worship was marked by not just immorality and everything else, but popularity and wealth. And here this little Christian congregation was, meeting in a rented hall, and they had no great wealth. And at times they kinda wondered 'What do we got?' And the Apostle Paul is writing to them, and he's sayin', 'Listen, you've got life! You're alive in Jesus.' He starts in chapter 2; he says 'You were dead, but now you're alive in Him. And you're vitally connected with the One who is in heaven.' And then he makes this glorious statement in chapter 2 verse 7, that tells us what the future is gonna be about, and that eternal world that God has prepared for us. He says "...so that in the ages to come," in the eternity ahead, he says "He", God, "...might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Unpackage that! For all eternity God is gonna take the wondrous depths of His heart for us, His grace that knows no limit, and He's gonna be showing it to us, touching us with it, pouring out into our lives that grace towards us in specific works and experiences of kindness that are flowing through the reality of Jesus Christ. That's eternity. It'll never end, 'cause the amazing wonder and diversity of God's grace will never end.

You say, 'I thought we were gonna be sittin' there playin' harps and singin'.' You know what, my guess is you'll play guitars and sing; harps or guitars...they were just called harps back then. That's my opinion. You're gonna do that...not because some angelic choir director said you gotta sing. You are gonna experience so much grace in so many different ways that you won't be able to do anything else but sing at times. That's a picture of eternity. That's the wonder of it, and it'll never end.

We tracked the biblical story of how it begins. At the very early pages of the Scriptures there's a good creation gone bad. It ends with a new creation forever good. And the main story line all the way through, and you gotta grasp this...the main story line all the way through is that man's sin, man's rebellion, man's resistance is ultimately answered by God's even greater grace, a grace that flows in a very different progression beginning with a promise of grace that Abraham, that ancient wanderer...that someday [through] one of his descendants all of mankind will be blessed; a promised grace that then was released in a descendant of David named Jesus—when the righteousness of God and the love of God met at the cross in Him and released God's grace for all those who would believe, a grace that now is being extended through this amazing, amazing thing called the church, that the world looks at and says, 'What a ridiculous thing!', but God looks at and says, 'Angels, note this. That's My wisdom right there, resilient and diversified, and able to extend My grace to all places across all times.' But the final, glorious picture is that grace goin' on forever and ever and ever and ever. A moment in time man chose to rebel, and for all eternity God has chosen to answer with grace.



There's only two times in the book of Revelation that God Himself speaks direct. All the other times it's angelic, or there's words of prophecy through John. But there's two times in the book of Revelation where God Himself, sitting on His throne, speaks. First, in chapter 1, there's a statement about God, Jesus is going to return. And it's followed immediately by a statement from the throne of God, that He is the Alpha and the Omega, and He is Lord God, sovereign over all. He makes sure we understand who it is behind that prophecy. It is God Himself.

Then we come to chapter 21, the chapter we're in right now, and God again speaks. At the end of the book He speaks again, a direct from heaven on His throne, and He says this... "He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" This is going to happen. And He says, 'Write it down; write it down, because it's gonna happen.'

As He does that, He makes a promise. And this is my favorite gospel statement, I think, in all of Scripture. And the promise He gives with that is this:

“I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.”

‘I will give to anyone who is thirsty the water of life without cost.’ That eternal kingdom, that eternal heavens and that new earth, is there for anyone simply for the wanting...simply for the wanting. If you want it, it’s yours. Now, we’re not talkin’ about a wishful impulse. ‘Yeah, that sounds cool!’ The very next verse talks about those who overcome. In other words, those who desire it with a thirst, a driving thirst, a thirst that will follow Jesus past every other desire, past every other distraction, to the Father. If you want it, it’s yours. If that’s your thirst, it’ll be quenched.

Let’s talk about the sea again. Like I said, my kayakers—and my brother was leading edge—takes issue. ‘Wait a minute, there’s no sea!’ And I...I mean, I pause, ‘cause I mean one of my favorite things the past two summers... been out sea kayaking with our high schoolers. And I just love it out there! Ok? It’s beautiful! Our commercial fishermen...they just love it! And they’re sayin’, ‘Wait a minute, Larry. There’s no sea!’ And so there’s a couple ways you can handle that when you deal with the text. Some argue ‘You know what? This is highly visionary passage of Scripture. We are talking about visionary symbolism. And really, what the sea means here is uncontrolled chaos, untamed and out of control chaos out of which evil can come. And in the new heavens and the new earth there’ll be no uncontrolled chaos, no unmanaged creation.’ And really, there’s some legitimate argument to that the way the word ‘sea’ is described, and the idea in terms of some prophetic passages. Others would say that ‘You know, what we’re dealin’ with here is a picture of vast humanity in a seething, uncontrollable mob.’ And you know, I had more trouble with that one. My kayak scholars take issue with the grammar here, and say if we placed the comma differently we may be able to save the sea.

I’m not gonna argue the interpretation. I’ll say this: whether it’s the sea, or some person, or some special thing, some great hope or some great dream, if there is anything...anything...that you would say ‘I’m disappointed, the vision sounds grand, but...’, if it is not enough for your heart to know in the new heavens and the new earth God will dwell among us, then you’re not yet thirsty. You’re not yet thirsty.

I’ll ask you to stand with me.

One of the more difficult things, when we share our faith and we talk about our commitment to Jesus Christ, is to talk about the future things. It goes beyond what people have seen, what they’ve heard, what they’ve ever imagined in their heart. And so it’s one of those things when you begin to talk about it sometimes you almost begin to see people’s eyes glaze over, or they want to get into some dramatic detail. And it’s a challenge to be able to share the wonder, and the glory, and the promise that we have in Jesus. And yet that’s exactly what this world needs if it’s to find hope, is the promise of what God has for the wanting in Jesus.

So as we go out into this community facing whatever this week holds, let’s pray together.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth and grip that grace in the name of Jesus. Amen.