

Looking for Answers in the Wrong Places

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[0 : 0 0] Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened.

Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them.

And each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. Lake of fire is the second death.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and 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.

[1 : 1 6] They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

For the old order of things has passed away. I'm going to speak now about Revelation and what we read there. Joe read earlier from the book of Revelation.

Chapter 20 and 21. I've watched loads of movies, actually, in lockdown. Some good, some bad, but probably the most memorable one was a film called Just Mercy.

And Just Mercy is a movie about a guy called John D. Macmillan. And he's a black man in Alabama who has been wrongfully convicted of murdering a young white woman and has spent many years on death row.

And it's about the fight for justice and freedom for this man. It's a really well made movie, a well told story of racial injustice and hatred.

[2 : 2 2] And there are some really moving scenes in it as we see men who had no access to fairness or justice being sent to their death in the penal system in Alabama.

And when we see that kind of injustice in our world, we cry out, don't we? In Revelation chapter 21 at verse 4, where Joe was reading, it says that in the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, God will wipe every tear from our eyes with no more death, mourning or crying.

But right now we do cry, we do weep for the brokenness of our world and for its injustices. We do long and ache for something better.

Our hearts are broken by the reality of our own sin and the sin around us in this world and for unjust systems.

And so those of us who are Christians, we are longing and aching and crying out before God. Because this world is not the way it's supposed to be.

- [3 : 37] We are longing for what John portrayed to us of a new heaven and a new earth. Where injustice and evil are finally banished forever.
- We want wrongs to be righted and injustices to be dealt with. And so that's the hope that Revelation holds out before us.
- That if we follow Jesus, that one day we will inherit a world of goodness and truth. But too often we don't want to follow Jesus.
- We want to find our own ways and our own answers. Too often we're looking in the wrong places. For hope. For justice. Or for comfort.
- So the kind of question that I've got before us today. The phrase that stays the Thursday thought. You know, when you wake up on Thursday morning and ask what was Neil talking about on Sunday.
- [4 : 38] I want you just to try and remember this. What if the world we all want is found in a saviour we don't follow? What if the world we all want is found in a saviour we don't follow?
- There's a world held out to us here. A world of beauty and justice and goodness. But it's found in Jesus Christ. And if we don't follow Jesus, we can't have that world.
- So I'm just going to think through this with you for a bit more. And I don't normally do alliteration, but this is an alliterative sermon. So the first thing I'm going to talk about is a parting and then a place and then a person and then a peace and then a presence.
- Okay, so sorry about that. Anyway, let's go with the parting. Okay. What if the world we all want is found in a saviour we don't follow? Then in the end we see there's going to be a parting.
- So that's what Joe read in chapter 20 verses 11 to 15, which is about the judgment to come. A great white throne is seen by John.
- [5 : 50] And the dead, great and small, stand before the throne and the books are opened. And then another book is opened and that's the book of life. And the dead are judged according to what they've done.
- So God's really clear right through the Bible that there is a day of reckoning for every single one of us. Our lives, our deeds, our thoughts, our motives, our words are written in God's book.
- We might be notorious sinners or we might be quiet and discreet sinners. We might be outrageous sinners or religious and pious sinners.
- But we are all sinners. And sin, you know, what's Neil talking about when he says sin? Well, sin is where we decide to depart company from God and part company from his ways.
- We reject his rule. We refuse to worship him. We exclude God from our lives and we won't go his way. For all those who choose that in this life, there is a day of reckoning.
- [7 : 03] There is two then as well, a book of life. It records all those who have found life in Jesus. They've put their faith in Jesus Christ to reconcile and restore them to God.
- So there's a parting there between those who have found life in Jesus and those who have refused life in Jesus. And if we won't have life in Jesus, then what do we face?
- Well, we face an eternal quarantine. What's pictured here is a never-ending lockdown with the worst people in the worst place. And God is describing that here as a second death or eternal death.
- It's to be cut off from his life-giving joy and love forever. And God pleads with you. I gave my son for you so you don't have to do that.
- Don't let this be your destiny. I'm holding out something better for you in my son, Jesus Christ. So there's a parting.

[8 : 15] But God says it doesn't have to be like that. There's a place, a better place that's on offer. And that's found at the beginning of verse of chapter 21, where John says, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

So this is the place. If, as humans, we ache for beauty and goodness, and a beauty and goodness that is free and untainted from everything that's wrong and sinful, then we find it here.

Not in a world of our making, but of God's making. In the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth. The old is gone and the new has come. All things are made new through Jesus Christ.

If you're not used to the Bible, it can seem like it's a kind of random book of weird stories and collections of histories of the Hebrew people, and then Jesus' disciples, and then some letters by a guy called Paul, and it might seem like it's very disjointed.

But the Bible actually has a lot of themes that run from beginning to end and give it a depth of unity that's remarkable. The big story of the Bible begins in Genesis with creation.

[9 : 34] Then we see the fall of humanity into sin as Adam and Eve reject God and his rule. They go their own way. Following Genesis and the fall, we have the story of redemption, how God promises that he will send a rescuer, a saviour, to restore us to relationship with him.

And the whole Old Testament points forward to the saviour who is Jesus. So Jesus comes to redeem us and rescue us. And having done that on the cross, he will one day restore all things.

And that's what we read about in the new creation. So from Genesis to Revelation, we've got this story of creation, fall, redemption, restoration.

The final act is the renewal of the whole cosmos, the whole heaven and earth coming together in the presence of God, renewed and made perfect by his glory.

So when we talk about salvation as Christians, we're not talking about escaping the earthly and the temporary for a spiritual and eternal world. The new creation is concrete and real.

[10 : 50] It's got buildings and trees and plants and flowers and rivers and mountains. It's this world made new. Life after death is not about a fluffy cotton wool world of endless boredom with weirdos who play the harp 24-7.

It's about people like you and me, redeemed and renewed, with new souls and new bodies living in a new universe, each in perfect harmony with the other.

We'll live in this new creation with a God-given mandate to explore, to cultivate, to develop and serve and enhance. Eternity is about exploring forever a world of untold wonder.

Donald MacLeod, my theology teacher, describes it this way, powerful bodies, brilliant minds living in a transformed universe, human beings with energy, dexterity and athleticism undreamt of in a universe of unimagined glory.

In this new world, in this new creation, all our losses and sadnesses are redeemed. There are no more tears. Everything we love about this world will be there.

[12 : 06] Everything that is good, but even more vivid and bright and beautiful. And we will see that God has taken all that we've lost and mourned for and redeemed those lost things and restored them in the most loving and healing way.

Our sadnesses are undone. That's a place that God holds before us in his son, Jesus Christ. And so at the heart of that place, there is a person.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, verse 3 says, saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them.

So at the heart of this place is a person. It's God's presence that fills this new world. He dwells there. Right now, heaven is not a faraway place on the other side of the galaxies.

Heaven is not a geographical location. Heaven is a place where God dwells. And in the new creation, heaven comes to earth.

[13 : 20] The new Jerusalem comes to earth. Because God dwells at the heart of the new creation. His presence is no longer located elsewhere.

Rather, his nearest, clearest presence fills the whole creation that we live in. The whole promise of the Bible from Eden onwards that we've just described, that narrative that runs through scripture, is that one day God will again live with his people, as he lived with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

That's at the heart of our covenant story in the Bible of God's redemptive history. And it comes true in this garden city, this garden city temple described here in Revelation.

That picture of this new Jerusalem, this new Eden, the church is imagined as the bride of Jesus Christ.

Marriage is a picture, ultimately, of the relationship between Jesus and his people. And marriage is used to picture that relationship in order to tell us that it's with Jesus that we find the deepest unity and the greatest community.

[14 : 38] It's with Jesus that we find ourselves made whole and made happy. And marriage is something that kind of points towards that. Another lockdown movie is Sleepless in Seattle.

So that gives us the Hollywood version of life. And in many Hollywood movies, it's not Jesus that saves us, it's marriage.

If we find the perfect partner, the perfect person, they will make us happy and whole. Well, a good marriage is a great thing. But it's not marriage that saves us.

It's our relationship with Jesus Christ. You don't need to be married to be a complete whole person. But without Jesus, we're always going to be looking for a fulfillment that eludes us.

The world we want, the life we want, the justice we want, the hope we want, the love we want is found in Jesus. And that's a problem if you won't follow him.

[15 : 45] Because he loves us. That's what this picture of marriage tells us, isn't it? He loves us. He loves us so much that he will die for us to make us his own. So to those of us today who are feeling very lonely because of lockdown, or anxious, or stress, to those who are weary, to those who are wounded, to those who are sad, his love is our greatest comfort.

You can be vulnerable with Jesus, absolutely open with him, and tell him of everything that pains you. He was a refuge for these first century Christians that were written to in the book of Revelation as they faced death and persecution.

And he's a refuge for us now in our suffering and struggles. Too often, we try and satisfy our appetite for heaven with more stuff, more food, or a new relationship, or with tech, or the latest gadget, or with clothing, or with holidays.

And it's hard. You know, lockdown shows us it's actually not an answer, is it? That so many of these things that we look to for fulfillment won't fulfill it.

They're so easily lost. We're looking in the wrong places because only Jesus ultimately heals and fulfills us.

[17 : 12] So, there's a parting for those who won't have Jesus. There's a place, the new creation. At the heart of that place is this person, this loving God who invites us into fellowship with himself, who longs for us to come into relationship with him.

And in that relationship, there's a peace. That's the fourth P in this alliterative sermon. This is the person who makes us at peace. This is the person who wipes away our tears.

Every tear gone. No more death, mourning, crying, or pain. Because when we're in heaven, when we're in the presence of God, we're home.

For the Christian, death is going home to our father. There's a song sung by many in English rugby fans, swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

Heaven is our ultimate destination. It's our ultimate rest. It's our home. We're free from depression, grief, anxiety, temptation, illness, and harassment.

[18 : 37] We rest, sharing in God's great, eternal Sabbath. What do we wear to this wedding? Well, we're told we're beautifully dressed.

And in Revelation, the idea is that we wear these white garments, these priestly garments, that speak of purity and belonging to God.

And that's an amazing thought if you start to dig into it, because these pure garments, these beautiful garments, these priestly garments, say that we belong with God.

we can be absolutely ourselves without God. This life is not just a life free from tears. It is a life full of the deepest joys, because we are totally at peace with who we are.

We don't have to hide anymore. We've been made clean. All our shame is gone. All our guilt is gone. Ed Welsh in a book.

[19 : 51] I'm always asked if I'll advertise a book in this. So, here's another book called Created to Draw Near. And he talks about this in the book. And he says, it's a way to a life without hiding.

If we receive Jesus, we're made clean and new. We don't have to hide anymore. No shame. We can look God in the face. There is a peace in that that we can't find and you won't find anywhere else.

Jesus is good to you. So, the fifth thing is a presence. Just to remember, what makes heaven heaven? It's the presence of God.

It's the fact that he dwells there. That's what makes it perfect. That's what makes it good. And good news of Christianity is this.

It's not just pie in the sky when you die. You get to experience his presence now. Not as completely, not as clearly, not as fully, not in the same uninterrupted way.

[21 : 07] But we still get to experience the presence of God in this world now in remarkable ways. God says that he will come and live with us through the Holy Spirit. He will live in us, be present in our lives, lead us, guide us, strengthen us, comfort us, help us, deliver us.

God is with us always. We can know his presence. Christians are described in the New Testament as the temple of God. That's because we're the ones who carry his presence in this world.

We're portable temples, priests who bring the presence of God to the world around us. Revelation is about the fact that will we stay loyal to God in the face of opposition?

Will we keep bringing his kingdom in this world even when things are hard? and bringing his kingdom means bringing his presence. And in a world where God seems absent to many people and maybe God seems absent to you, the calling that I have and every Christian have is to bring God's presence at our work, in our homes, on our street.

And we see how much the world is broken and needs God's presence. So to those of us who are Christians I want to say this, I want to say to bring his presence we need to learn to linger in his presence.

[22 : 45] We have to slow down each day to walk in fellowship and friendship with him, to enjoy his goodness, to delight in him and worship him, to pray big prayers and small prayers long prayers and short prayers, formal prayers and formal prayers.

We walk in prayerful intimacy, fellowship and friendship with our Father in Heaven, living our lives before his face, lingering in his presence.

And to those of you who are not Christians, you can also experience God's presence. How? Well, through prayer. prayer. You may never have prayed before.

You may be wondering about prayer for the first time, but you're not really sure about what prayer is. Well, prayer is simply talking to the unseen God.

How do you do that? Well, you just talk in your head or out loud. You just speak to him. You can just say, Father in Heaven, I don't know if you're listening and I don't know what to say, so help me out.

[24 : 00] I want to know if you're real. And if you are, I want you to help me change. I want to know your presence. I was watching a program called New Amsterdam, and the lead character is Dr.

Max Goodwin. He's been through a terrible loss and bereavement. He runs a hospital, but he's not a believer. He's not a religious person. But some Christians come into the hospital and pray.

And he's eventually persuaded by them to some extent. And he asks somebody in this group of Christians, what's prayer about? Why can't we change everything we want to when we pray?

And the answer he gets is, well, sometimes prayer is about changing you. And prayer will change us. Because when we pray, we are drawing near to God.

We're entering the presence of his glory and goodness, his mercy. And that is a transformative experience that profoundly blesses our soul and brings us the greatest peace of all.

[25 : 15] As a church, prayer was going to be one of our great themes for 2020. So, chorus donors, keep praying, because we need his presence now, so does the world.

And if you've never prayed before, I'm just going to invite you, pray with me now. Okay? You can repeat after me if you want, I'll go nice and slow. Lord, thank you that we can talk to you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Lord, we're not sure sometimes what to say to you. But Father in heaven, we want to know your presence and your peace.

Please answer us. Amen. Amen. So that's Revelation 20, 21.

It's about a parting that we don't want. It's about a place, a person, a peace, and a presence that's all found in Jesus Christ.

[26 : 31] So I'm just leaving you again with that thought. What if the world you want is found in the Savior that you don't follow? And maybe today is the day for you to just say to Jesus, I want to follow you.

I want to follow you.