

# Revelation 21:1-4

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I wonder how you would sum up the story of history. How would you sum up the purpose of this world? Is it a random adventure of chance? Is it a progressive human journey of enlightenment? Is it a period of testing before we go to a heaven-like place?

Churchill said, history will be kind to me, for I intend to write history. But what would you say is the meaning of history? What is the purpose of life in this world? What is it all about? Why are we here? What are we here for?

People have asked that question, haven't they, for thousands of years. I want to try and answer that in 20 minutes. Or actually in two seconds. Because I think John gives us the answer to that question in just four words.

What is the summary? What is the meaning of the whole of history? If you look at verse 3 there in the middle, behold, the dwelling place, four words, God is with man. God is with man.

This is the conclusion to all of history. God is with man. And they are the words, aren't they, that sum up the reason for the season at Christmas time.

[ 1 : 21 ] Matthew, in his gospel, he says that's why the baby was born at Christmas time. And that baby was to be called Emmanuel, which means God with us, God with man.

But that, those words are also the reason for all seasons. It is the reason for the whole of history in this world.

It is what this place around us was made for. And why you are put in this world, that human beings would know God with them, living with them.

That is the history that the Bible claims is the real history. It is about this union and fellowship and relationship that God creates us for and invites us into.

If you know the story of the Bible, you kind of see the Bible has a, the story of history has a shape to it. And it's a bit like a U shape. If you were here last week, it kind of starts off at the top, doesn't it?

[ 2 : 25 ] Do you remember the beginning of the nativity story, God with man, started actually back in creation in the book of Genesis. Where once upon a time, God makes a place where this union was planned and prepared for.

A beautiful, satisfying, fulfilling place. And he creates human beings in his image to represent him where? In the creation.

God was involved in his creation. And the pattern then was God with man in God's place under his rule as his people.

But we know as we look at the world today, that is not how the world is, is it? But man has said, actually, we don't like this God with man idea.

We want out. We want to be alone without God. And so, the kind of U shape, it goes down, doesn't it? Into the world that we see today.

[ 3 : 33 ] But, by the end of the Bible, we're promised that there will be a great ascent on this U shape. And this world will not go on as it is forever.

Just as there was a beginning to the story, there will be an end. And there is a fixed time with a change in this world as we know it. And the birth of Jesus shows us again that God's plan is relentless.

And it will be completed. It will be God with man. Again. We see in our passage the end of that story, don't we, in Revelation.

Somebody has said about the book of Revelation in the Bible, that it's the story of the happy ending par excellence. As a conquering hero, defeats evil, marries a bride, and lives happily ever after in a palace glittering with jewels.

And that is a great summary of history, of the history of the world. That the hero defeats the dragon and gets the girl. It's a story of Jesus Christ in whom God and man are united.

[ 4 : 47 ] And Jesus comes to take his bride, his people, his church, into himself to live with his bride forever in his palace. God with us.

It's a beautiful story, isn't it? With a happily ever after. But it's not a fairy story. It is the reality that is in the history of the world that all stories are based on.

That's why we love that kind of story, isn't it? Because deep down, we know it's a reflection of the real history of the world and where it's going. We were in the dip, weren't we?

But with the birth of Jesus, we know that we're now rising up again. And life will find its summit, its goal here in the last two chapters of the Bible.

And I want to try and give you a sense, if I can, of why God with us, God with man, is so fundamental to the happy ending of our story working out.

[ 5 : 52 ] John says, picture it with me. Since God is with us in this scene here, there will be three things happening. There will be a new place, and a new people, and a new rule.

So first of all, a new place. A new place. And just look at verse 1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I don't know if you listened to Sir David Attenborough's speech to the UN Climate Change Summit a couple of weeks ago.

Right now, he says, we are facing a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years. Climate change. And he closed. Leaders of the world, you must lead the continuation of our civilizations and the natural world upon which we depend is in your hands.

And he's such a great speaker, isn't he? His voice is like silk, as you kind of listen to it. It's a good speech. And my kind of initial response was I was nodding with him.

[ 7 : 04 ] I was agreeing with him. He was right. And yet he was wrong at the same time. Maybe climate change is a massive threat.

I'm not a scientist. And I agreed. We do depend on the natural world for life. But the Apostle John would say, Sir David, actually you're missing the point.

Because the ultimate solution to the fallenness of this place all around us is not in doing recycling and reducing carbon emissions, although they are good things.

The only solution to the problems in nature, the only thing that will make it right, is this God with man situation.

The renewal and restoration of earth and heaven, of this place around us, is secured by that fact alone.

[ 8 : 06 ] When that relationship is restored perfectly, so will the world. John uses the language of new, doesn't he?

The new heaven and new earth, when God and man are brought together. And it's the kind of idea of rebirth, like in John's Gospel that we looked at a few weeks ago. The word new, if you think about it, it could mean two different things.

It could mean new, as in completely new, with no reference to what has gone before. Like if I demolish a house, get rid of it all, and build something completely new from scratch.

He could be meaning that. Or, as if God sort of annihilates the old world and starts from scratch. Or he could be saying something where there's a bit more continuity.

It's a bit like, I don't know, if you say, I feel like a new man after a cup of tea. Or, I've had my dinner, I feel like a new woman now. That's a really bad illustration, isn't it?

[ 9 : 12 ] But, it's that sense of continuation and continuity. Notice he calls this new place the same thing. The new earth and the new heaven.

So, it will be a radical transformation. But, not so radical, I think, as to make the new earth unrecognisable.

It's really difficult to imagine, isn't it? What he's talking about. But, we do get some clues, don't we, from the first glimpse of this new creation.

Did you know that this new creation has already started? And, we can see this new creation already in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Think about what the disciples first saw when they met the risen Jesus. They didn't recognise him for quite a while, did they? He is radically different.

[10:12] And yet, then after a while, they realise it's him. Of course it's him. He is physical. He eats fish. And yet, he isn't constrained in the same way as he was before.

He just appears in a room with locked doors and solid walls. You could say that everything he was has now been glorified and ramped up.

So, he's not less physical. But, he's more physical. His physicality has a weightiness to it. And, it's even more solid. And, it's even more solid than the walls and the doors of the locked room.

And, so the new heaven and earth certainly won't be less earth-like and less physical, but glorified. And, rather than weak and perishable like Jesus' body was before he died, it will be imperishable and profoundly more physical.

And, it won't be just a throwback, kind of going back in time to Genesis 1, actually. It won't just be going back to the Garden of Eden, not just back to square one.

[11:28] And, if you think about it, Jesus' body, as a kind of glimpse of the new creation, is not raised with a body that is like it was before. It is not killable in the way that it was before.

It is not curseable, is it, in the way that it was before. It is an immortal, imperishable, glorified body. And, so this new heaven and new earth is a glorified and transformed place.

It's not just going back to square one. So, when God and man come together, at the end we see a new place. Because, secondly, there will be a new people.

There will be a new people. The place will change, fundamentally because the people in it will change. And, this will happen when this unity between God and man is fulfilled.

And, look at verse 2. And, I saw a holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

[12:39] John uses picture language to describe this union between Jesus and his church. And, he describes God's people like a bride being prepared for marriage.

And, this is really, really key here. Because, when the God with people relationship is restored, so then are all things.

And, it can never be the other way round. And, in that relationship, the bride, the people of God are prepared to be beautiful.

And, so, when the people change and are beautified, the creation is changed along with them. I spent a little bit of time shadowing a worker for Christians Against Poverty.

You might have heard of them. It's a group that help folk who are in debt and in difficult situations. They're really good. And, on occasion, you'd visit some of these folk. And, in the really serious cases, they might be struggling with all kinds of social problems and relational issues and depression and things like that.

[13:53] But, what was interesting was that if there were problems relationally or emotionally, things that you can't see, there would be problems physically in their home.

In the actual fabric of the living room, literally. If the family in the house breaks down, the house becomes a mess. And, it physically breaks down and becomes disordered, quite literally.

Now, I'm not saying that if you've got a messy house, that means you've got those problems or you've got messy relationships, just come and look at my house. But, it often does work the other way around, doesn't it?

When the deeper issues are undealt with, then physical manifestations around appear. But, when those issues are dealt with, the place starts to get more organised and more beautiful.

So, as Jesus comes to restore God to man and deal with that, we want out sin attitude. There is this work of beauty preparation for his bride.

[15:05] The whole of creation is affected by the beautification of the human race by Jesus. The people change, and so the house changes around it.

The problem, I think, with much of the debates over climate change, and what Attenborough, although his intentions are good, he misses, is that the fabric and the weave of this world is fundamentally based on that relationship working.

That is what the design of this world was all about, wasn't it? God with man. But man separates what God has meant to join together.

And everything falls apart then, literally, around us. No matter what we try to do to fix it. That broken relationship leads to a broken home.

In every sense of the world. Behind the physical world is the fundamental idea of a design, and not just a design that happens to be beautiful, but a design for relationship between God and man.

[16:19] Haven't we lost appreciation for this? Just think about the words that we use to describe the world in which we live. We've abandoned the word creation in modern speaking, haven't we?

Now we refer to it as the environment, or as climate, or as our surroundings, or nature. And in that, there's just a denial, isn't there, that creation is built by God, and is designed by God as a place, that has spiritual relationship with him at its core.

God with man. And until that is sorted, nothing else will remedy the problems of the physical world. The creation, Paul says in Romans, is subject to futility.

Until that relationship is restored. Waiting for the revealing of the sons of God, he says. Again, it's the same idea, isn't it? When the people are brought together with God, and when they are revealed, the creation, the rest of creation, will finally breathe.

And the house will be ordered again, and it will be beautiful again. So when God comes as a man into the world to restore that relationship, he deals with the key problem, doesn't he?

[17:44] He brings a new place, because he also brings a new people to himself. And thirdly and lastly, because that new people will enjoy a new rule.

They will enjoy a new king. Just drop down to verse 3, with your eyes there. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people.

And God himself will be with them as their God. It's like a kingdom, isn't it? With a king and his people. And 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. Life in any kingdom, and in any country, any place where people live, is dependent on the welfare and the quality of the king, or ruler of that country, isn't it?

So when a government struggles, for whatever reason, not to govern, it is not a good thing for the people. But when a king or government is wise, and just, and totally powerful to protect, and kind and loving, the citizens of that place are very blessed.

[19:10] It's what the Magi realise, isn't it, when they see the star, is that the one they went to visit, is a king. So what Herod realises, that's why he wants to kill Jesus off, because he threatens his kingdom.

And this is the king who will unite God and man, in his person. He is fully God, and fully man. And he will unite them together, in the world, by bringing man together, to himself as his bride.

And he is a king who will rule with power, and justice, and kindness. And he will remove the enemies of his people, death and pain forever. He will defeat the dragon, and he will get the girl.

It's the story of history, isn't it? It is why John, in his gospel, is slightly different, from the other gospels. It doesn't start with the birth story, does it?

But with a creation story. Do you remember how John's gospel starts? In the beginning. He sees the coming of Jesus, the coming of the Son, in the flesh, as the beginning of the end of the story, where men and women, will enjoy a new place.

[20:32] As new people, with a new rule, he sees it as a new creation, doesn't he? Because God is with man. He has become flesh, and dwelt among us.

Maybe you can see the parallels, between creation, in Genesis, and the birth of Jesus. Just as the Holy Spirit, we're told, hovered over the face of the waters, in creation, he hovered, hovered, over Mary, and conceived life in her.

It's as if her womb, it's like the, the kind of place of new creation, isn't it? Again. And just as the Father, spoke, the world into being, by his word, and formed the world, by the power of his spirit, he sends his, incarnate word, conceived by the spirit, to bring a new creation.

Because he will be the king, who rescues and rules, and beautifies his bride. So just as we close, on a bit of a side note, we can make a big difference, can't we, by recycling, and using our cars less, and we should probably do that, shouldn't we?

That is a good thing. But John shows us here, that the only way, the environment, this place that we live in, will be rescued, is when Jesus returns, to dwell with his people fully.

[21:59] When God is with man. The only way, that this planet will be saved, then, is by telling people, the gospel.

And by showing people, where God, is going to dwell with man, in the Lord Jesus Christ. And by looking forward to, his return. The only thing, that will rescue people, and this place, and this rule, that we live in, is when God, is with man forever.

And so, we praise the Lord, don't we, for sending us, a child, who is called, Emmanuel. God with us. I heard a loud voice, from heaven saying, behold the dwelling place, of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. And God himself, will be with them, as their God. Let's pray.