

Revelation 20 & 21

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm sure you've noticed the newspapers the last two or three weeks have been full of predictions about what's going to happen in 2015.! Which films to look out for, which bands to look out for, etc, etc. Predictions perhaps even of what's going to happen, although I don't think anyone predicted terrorist attacks in France this early in the year.

But as human beings we're insatiably curious about the future, aren't we? Because the future impacts us now. If you've got a job interview coming up, that will no doubt shake the way you're using your time now.

If you've got exams coming up, that's maybe affecting what you're doing now. It certainly should be. The future breaks in, doesn't it? It affects our actions and our attitudes.

And yet we live in a world which has a pretty bleak view of the future. Back in 1991, the Canadian author Douglas Coupland wrote a novel called Generation X, which has sort of defined a generation really.

In that book, he has this line where one of the characters says, I envy my parents' generation. Their lives were so free of futurelessness.

[1 : 12] He was saying that futurelessness, hopelessness, was one of the defining characteristics of the generation he was writing about, which I guess was my generation really.

But how much more true is that after the financial crisis of a few years ago? How much more true is that now we're faced with terrorism on the streets? How much more true is that in a climate where it's still hard to get a job?

Futurelessness, hopelessness, despair is a characteristic of our society. You see that in the binge drinking that blights the streets of this city and every town up and down this country.

We see it in the way people will distract themselves, amuse themselves to death with trivial entertainment or with sport or whatever comes to try and fill a vacuum in their lives and give them something to hope for.

Whether it's promotion to the premiership or perhaps winning a trophy this season. Those things aren't bad themselves, but they can be indicative of a life, a nation given to futurelessness.

[2 : 19] Yet in contrast, what are the characteristics of Christians? As we read through the New Testament, aren't there three things that keep on leaping out of us?

There's faith, there's love, and there's hope. We're to be people of hope because we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, Peter, in a very famous verse, 1 Peter 3.15, says this. It says, always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.

See, there are two assumptions there about Christian hope, aren't there? Firstly, that our hope is visible. The way we live as Christians show that we have hope. The way we live when we're suffering.

The way we live when we're dealing with depression or illness. The way we live when life seems against us. It shows that we have hope. So Christian hope should be visible.

[3 : 18] But secondly, Peter implies that Christian hope is rational. Do you hear that? Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have. It is a reasonable, rational thing to have hope.

In contrast to the despair of this world. For those of us who know Jesus, there is real hope. That's why this morning we're going to look at that hope. We're looking at Revelation 21 and 22.

We're going to focus on verses 1 to 8 of Revelation 21. We'll also dive a little bit into the rest of chapter 21 and chapter 22. So we can see again this hope that is before us. This hope that Jesus gives us.

Revelation 21 and 22 are this little picture at the end of the Bible. To show us what is coming. It's a bit like those pictures we get on the tube these days. I was sitting on the tube on Thursday heading to Hammersmith.

And there on my train, on my carriage, was a little picture. Of a train going through the Swiss Alps. And it was calling to me. Come on holiday in Switzerland.

[4 : 17] Well, I can't quite do that. But you see the idea? It's like, get away from the dullness. Get away from the grey. There's something beautiful out there to enjoy. I remember last year being trapped on a tube platform with thousands of other people.

Looking up at this humongous picture of a Norwegian fjord. And the sun was shining. And the sea was blue. And the mountains were snow-capped. And if I wouldn't have killed myself stepping on the line to get there, I felt like jumping into that picture.

Away from the grey and cold of London. Well, that's what Revelation 21 is for. It's a picture to lift our eyes. To hope that it's ours in Jesus Christ. To make us long to be there.

And to know that it is more real, more certain. Than those adverts on the tube. Let's see four things briefly about this hope this morning. Firstly, it's perfect. It's given.

It's given. It's certain. And it's open. It's perfect. It's given. It's certain. And it's open. Look at verse 1, will you? Then I saw a new heavens.

[5 : 20] And a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. This is something new. It's something perfect. Now for the world to be perfect, some old things need to have gone.

And some new things need to have come. So what's gone? Well, look on in verse 1. The sea was no more. The sea was no more. Now I grew up next to the sea as a teenager.

I love the sea. Some of you probably really love the sea. You go surfing and all that kind of stuff. Do not despair. When John says the sea was no more, he's not necessarily making a comment about the end of oceanography.

Rather, he's making a point about the end of Satan. If you've been reading through the story of Revelation, back in chapter 13, verse 1, the beast came out of the sea. The beast was Satan's minion.

Come to do Satan's work. Representing world powers in hostility towards God and towards God's people. So the fact there is no more sea doesn't mean beach holidays are over.

[6 : 23] It means Satan is over. There is no more evil. There is nothing to destroy this perfect world. There is no more persecution. No more Islamic State.

No more gangs roaming the streets of Baghdad looking to kidnap Christians and extort a ransom out of them. No more godless states like North Korea. No more sea is good news.

You'll also look at verse 4. There will be no more death. No more mourning. No more crying. No more pain. For those all order of things is gone. Everything that mars our world.

Everything that brings sadness into our lives. Everything will be gone on that day. Do you notice who's going to wipe the tears away? Verse 4.

He, that is God, will wipe away every tear from their eyes. It's one of the common sayings around our house at the moment.

[7 : 24] When Joel, our three-year-old, gets a bit upset and is in floods of tears. Through the sobs. He goes, please, please, you wipe my tears away. It sort of melts the heart, even of a hard man like me.

Because he wants the comfort of his mummy or daddy or sometimes his sister to wipe those tears away. And who ultimately is going to wipe our tears away? Our Heavenly Father.

That's the promise. There are a couple of implications in that, aren't there? One is that there are some tears that will remain until Jesus comes back.

There are some tears that will remain until Jesus comes back. I can't imagine what it's like to have been abused as a child. I can't imagine what it's like to have a marriage break down and someone you love leave you for somebody else.

I cannot imagine what it's like for the refugees fleeing Iraq and Syria to be left homeless and destitute. As their homes are destroyed.

[8 : 28] As they're chased away for their faith. I can't imagine those things. Some of those tears, some of those scars will be real all through this life. And will only be wiped away on that last day.

But when we say, please you wipe my tears away. It's going to be our Heavenly Father who does it. That is the perfect world that is coming. That is what is gone. The tears, the mourning, the crying, the pain.

So we need patience in this world. We need patience and realistic expectations, don't we? There's always this great hope of trying to create the perfect world now, isn't there? We expect life to be easy sometimes.

Last week or a couple of weeks ago, we drove up to Scotland for New Year. I would see my parents. Not for New Year. They were planning to be back here for New Year. So I did what you tend to do when you go on a long journey.

I looked at the roadworks on the AA website in the morning. I saw the roadworks all the way up the M6. I said, okay, we're not going up the M6. We'll go to the A1N instead. And three hours later, when we were still stuck in stationary traffic because of an accident around Peterborough.

[9 : 33] If you don't know where Peterborough is, you haven't missed anything. But let me just say, it's south, not north. It's a long way short of our journey. I was getting pretty impatient. But why?

This world is not perfect. There will be frustrations. We need God-given patience and realistic expectations. It won't be perfect until Jesus comes back and we get the new heavens and the new earth.

So that's what's gone. What makes it new is the bad stuff that's gone. Satan and suffering. But what's come? Well, look at verse 3. I heard a loud voice from the throne 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. So that's what's come. God has come to dwell.

And that's the story of the Bible, isn't it? Some people think the Bible is a rule book or a book of ethics. It's not. And the Bible is not God's search for man either. The Bible is not man's search for God.

[10 : 39] It's God's search for man. At the beginning, God walked in the garden. Genesis 3.8 with his people. And then they sinned and were cast out the garden.

But then he chose Israel, rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. Had the tabernacle built amongst them. And he said, Leviticus 26.11. I will make my dwelling among you.

My soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and be your God. It's the same word for walk as in Genesis 3.8. It's not just a normal form for walk, like walking from A to B.

But it expresses the idea of walking to and fro, of being there, of being in fellowship, walking together with. But of course Israel failed, didn't they? Israel broke the covenant.

Whilst later on God had dwelt in the tent in all his glory. When Israel rebelled completely and was sent into exile, Ezekiel sees a vision of the glory of the Lord going out from the temple.

[11 : 42] Ezekiel 10. God once again has to go away because of human sin. Yet God comes back to dwell, doesn't he? John chapter 1 verse 14.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory. The glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And Jesus after he died and rose again, did that mean God's glory had gone forever?

No, because Jesus sent his spirit, didn't he? And the spirit comes down at Pentecost. And once again the spirit dwells in God's people. So Paul can say in Ephesians 2 of the church.

In him you also, you the church, you Christians are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit. So the Bible is God's search for man.

God coming to live with people. And that story will be finally complete in the new creation. When God dwells forever. And there will be no sin for him to have to leave because of.

[12 : 46] And that's why if you read on through the rest of chapter 21, we see this city that John sees. There's a place of beauty with gems and jewels shining with the glory of God.

Because God dwells there. See, the world to come, the new creation is perfect. The bad has gone. And God has come. So question, what is it you long for in life?

What is it you thirst for in life? A quiet day? They never come, do they? A simple life? I often wish for that. But life never is simple, is it?

There are always things that come at us out of left field. Shouldn't we really long for this? For this perfect world.

Where God wipes away our tears. And we dwell with him forever. The future is perfect. Secondly, the future is given. Look at that.

[13:45] You see all the words used here. Look at chapter 1. I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And, sorry, going on to verse 2.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Or verse 5. I am making all things new, says God sitting on the throne.

See, it's given. This comes from God. We do not create the new creation. Every human philosophy has some kind of idea of how to make a perfect world, doesn't it?

Communism was one solution to how to get a perfect world. Capitalism is the other humanistic solution to how to get a perfect world. But we cannot create a perfect world.

Can we? It's very telling. This week I saw some interviews with people on the streets in Paris. And they had that minute silence in the Place de la République and elsewhere.

[14:42] And one man interviewed by the BBC in the Place de la République said that during the minute silence, he just looked up at the statue. The statue in the middle of the square. Now the statue in the middle of the Place de la République features Marielle, who is an embodiment representation of the French Republic.

And also there are symbols for liberty, fraternity and equality. The three great cries of the French Revolution. That was a human attempt to create heaven on earth, to get rid of the injustice of the monarchy, to throw out religion, to bring about liberty, fraternity and equality.

Yet that dream cannot protect a nation from violence and evil. I felt for that guy looking up at that statue.

The great hope of a secular republic cannot provide security and perfection. No human solution can. This new perfect world is given by God.

It is something that comes down from heaven. But as Christians, we can often fall into the same error. We can often think that we do something to create the perfect world now.

[15:55] So there are some Christians who will say, well, God's mission is to make the world perfect, and therefore that's our mission too. So a couple of years ago, a friend sent me a prayer letter saying how his mission that God was calling him to was to work in urban areas, in the arts, which is good, great thing to do, nothing wrong with that, but to bring about renewal and changing the culture.

Well, that may happen, but that is not the mission God has given us. One day God will make everything new. One day God will redeem culture completely. One day everything will be perfect. But right now, that's not our mission. Yes, we're called to be salt and light. Yes, by being salt and light, it may, by God's grace, mean we influence our culture and influence our workplace or influence the arts or influence our government.

And that's a great thing when it happens, but that's not what God promises us will happen. And it's not God's purpose for us. We do not build the kingdom.

God brings the kingdom. If you look through the New Testament, our job is not to bring the kingdom, but to bear witness to it. We bear witness to it through our words as we speak the gospel to people.

[17:16] We bear witness to it through our actions as we live lives that are indeed salt and light, making, by God's grace, a difference in the world around us.

We bear witness to the kingdom by our words, by our works, and by our worship, by gathering today to praise King Jesus. We're declaring to a world that the kingdom is here and is coming. See, our job is to bear witness to what God is doing through our words, our works, and our worship. That God is the one who will create this new kingdom.

And we can see that if we look closely at what it is that John actually sees. Do you see what he sees? Look at verse 2. What does he describe? How does he describe the New Jerusalem? He says, Coming down out of heaven from God as a bride adorned for our husband.

If you look down to verse 9 for a second, what is it he sees? One of the angels, one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls of the seven last plagues, plagues of judgment, spoke to me saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

[18:27] Who is the bride of Christ in the Bible? It's the church, isn't it? It's us. See, what John is seeing here, at the center of this new creation, is God's people perfected.

The bride adorned for her husband. He's seeing the church as it will one day be. If you look on in that description in chapter 21, which we don't have time to look at all of it, but verse 14, the city is, the foundations of the city have the twelve names of the apostles of the Lamb.

Just as Paul says in Ephesians 2, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles, the apostles' teaching, with Christ as a cornerstone. So this city that comes down is not a city built by hands, by human hands.

It's God's city. It's given by God. It's this church perfected. It's God created. God perfects it. God is at the center of it as well. Let's go down to verse 15 for a moment, chapter 21.

Have you ever thought about the strange dimensions of this city? Oh, I'm looking at the wrong verse. Go a bit further. Go down to verse 16. The city lies four square.

[19 : 33] Its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod. It was 12,000 stadia. That's about 1,300 miles. 1,300 miles wide. 1,300 miles long.

And, get this, its length and height and width and height are equal. So what does this city look like? It's a humongous cube. 1,300 miles wide. I think that's about the distance from London to Athens. Imagine a cube that big. Why is it a cube? What's John trying to tell us? Well, there's only one other cube in the Bible. There's only one other cube in the Bible.

And that was the Holy of Holies at the center of the temple where the presence of God dwelt. The point John is making, the point Jesus is making through John is that one day everything will be holy because God will dwell among us.

once it was only the high priest who could go in there once a year. And now the perfect sacrifice has been offered and we will live in the Holy of Holies, in perfection in the new creation forever.

[20 : 40] That is the hope that we have. The new creation is perfect and it's given. As God is at the center of it, creates it, perfects it, and completes his purposes.

If you look on to chapter 21 briefly, you'll see there are echoes of Eden here. In Eden, there was a tree of life that when Adam sinned, they were cast out in the garden so he couldn't eat it. But now look at Revelation 21, verse 2.

Through the middle of the streets, also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding the fruit each month. Now the tree of life is there for all to enjoy.

What Adam and Eve couldn't enjoy, we all will do. And we will all see God face to face, he tells us there in chapter 22. The new creation is perfect and it's given.

It's not something we create. It's something God in his grace gives to us and does for us. But thirdly, this new creation is certain.

[21 : 43] It's all very well to see it having this perfect picture, isn't it? But how do we know it's going to happen? How can we be sure this isn't just wishful thinking? After all, the way we use the word hope normally in the English language really just means something I wish for, doesn't it?

So I hope Scotland will win some games in the Six Nations rugby. It's probably a forlorn hope, but I hope it anyway. That's just wishful thinking.

But Christian hope is not wishful thinking. It's certain, it's guaranteed. And there's something here that shows us it's guaranteed. This perfect future is not just wishful thinking.

Let's look down to verse 9 for a moment. What I want us to notice is the word John uses for the Lord Jesus. The angel says, come I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

The Lamb. In fact, seven times in these verses John described that Jesus is the word Lamb for Jesus. Why? Well, on one level because Jesus is the Lamb of God who's taken away the sins of the world.

[22 : 45] But actually if we'd read through the whole of Revelation we'd kind of get the picture. Because back in Revelation chapter 5 when John first uses this term the angel says to him John's weeping because no one's able to open up the scroll which has God's purposes and God's plans in it.

The angel says to him don't worry for the lion of Judah has conquered. In Revelation chapter 5 verse 6 John turns and says I saw I looked to see the lion and what did he see?

I saw the Lamb standing as though it had been slain. Because the one who conquers the one who has triumphed is the one who triumphed through a sacrificial death the Lord Jesus.

He is the Lamb who is slain and is alive again. And that's why we can be certain that this new creation will happen. Because it's achieved by the Lamb through his death and sacrifice.

It's certain because of Jesus. Because he is resurrected and reigning. He makes that future certain. And that's what Christian hope is. It's certainty. A friend of mine is teaching British Sign Language rather is a signer for deaf people.

[23 : 59] Now if some of you know sign language forgive me if I get this wrong. But this is what I think Rachel taught me. That the normal word for hope in sign language is fingers crossed. Fingers crossed.

I hope this will happen. It's how we use hope in English. The work of hope for Christians is this. Want it? Got it. Arm forward.

Want it? Got it. Close your face. Because that's Christian faith. The world we all want given by God we want it we've got it. It's certain.

Because the Lamb has died and risen again. And if we trust in him we are part of his body we are only part of that early city forever. Part of that new creation where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things is God.

We want it. We've got it. It's certain. This new world that's coming is perfect it's given by God and it's certain. Which leads on is one last question really, doesn't it?

[24 : 59] Who's it for? Who's it for? Well let's look down back to chapter 21 for a moment. Look to verse 6. And he, that is God sitting here on the throne said to me it is done I am the Alpha and the Omega the beginning and the end to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

See this is open. The new creation is open it's open for all who will thirst for it and all who long for it all who desire for it. So often we're too easily satisfied aren't we?

We want things to be satisfied now we want to have a perfect world now. It's not going to be perfect now but if we thirst for a world where God is at the centre rather than us if we thirst for a world which God has made perfect where God has dealt with all his enemies forever and judged them then is an open invitation.

It's not that it's free it's not that it's free because it's very costly wasn't it? It cost the Lord Jesus his life. He died on the cross and rose again to win it for us.

It's not free but it's free at the point of delivery. It's like the National Health Service in that respect. It's not free it gets paid for our taxes but it's free at the point of delivery. And I've been making the most of that over the last few years.

[26 : 23] And having lived in America and having to pay insurance I'm very glad to have the National Health Service. Free at the point of delivery. Free for those who need. If you're thirsty for a God centred world if you're thirsty for your sins to be done away with if you're thirsty for everything to be made new then you can come.

This is open offer open invitation. You see I will give the spring of the water of life without payment. Now for John's readers living in a hot dry land that was a powerful image wasn't it?

For us in January it's perhaps less powerful. But he can come for free just admitting that we're thirsty admitting our need for what only God can provide believing that it's only through Jesus the land that that knee is met trusting him to be our king our rescuer our shepherd then this is ours.

It's an open invitation wherever you've been whatever you've done it's open for you if you thirst. Look what else he says verse 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Now how can we be conquerors? Does that mean we have to be like cyclists in the Tour de France drugged up and trained up so we can endure going up and down mountains and all that kind of stuff?

[27 : 45] No. We conquer through him who has conquered. Conquering means trusting in the conqueror in Jesus through whom we have the victory. Revelation 12 makes that clear verse 11 says this they Christians have conquered that is they conquered Satan conquered the accuser of God's people how?

By the blood of the lamb through the sacrifice of Jesus we can be conquerors by trusting in Jesus and goes on by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony that's not our testimony as to how we became Christians but our verbalising our speaking the message of Jesus speaking about him that's how we that's how we conquer by trusting in the lamb who's conquered trusting the lamb who's conquered but I want us to be clear on this there are two futures awaiting there is the new creation for those who conquer those who thirst those who trust in the lamb but look again at

verse 8 of chapter 21 as for the cowardly the faithless the detestable as for murderers the sexually immoral sorcerers idolaters and all liars their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur which is the second death see the contrast the contrast is between those who conquer by trusting in Jesus and the cowardly who will not trust in Jesus who will only live for this world who will only want to be at home in this world that's what the idolatry and everything else is about it's about being at home now not longing for the true home to come now I don't know about you but this verse is a rebuke to me how often can I be so bold here amongst

God's people and yet be silenced through speaking about Jesus by a mean look or a fear of what someone else will think isn't that tragic why would I choose temporary safety in a passing world instead of trusting in the eternal security that comes through Jesus so the future is certain because Jesus is conquered it's open to all who will trust in him but the future is certain and bleak for all who will not trust in him for all who will trust in their own goodness their own church going attendance their own niceness or whatever else it is so can I plead with you if you haven't done it before turn to Jesus trust in him come to the land who's conquered only he can pay for your sin don't hedge your bets don't be a coward and look for safety in this world but long for the future world to come what difference should this great future that Jesus holds out to us make to us now let me tell you a little story to try and illustrate and with this

I'll close a few years ago Merrill and I and a couple of friends from another church went to a wedding up in Glasgow and you know what weddings are like there's often a very long gap between the wedding and when you actually get any food and to exacerbate this gap the wedding was in Glasgow on the west coast the reception was on the east coast now Scotland is not that big admittedly but the M8 or the M9 whichever motorway it was can be awful and there were roadworks so as soon as we got out the wedding we stopped at a service station and bought some coke some crisps some tablet if you've never been to Scotland tablet is something that only the Scots I say this as a Scotsman could have invented it's a heart attack on a plate so it's condensed milk extra sugar and more lard boiled up for hours into this ridiculously sweet stuff I almost brought some this morning Mary took a bite the other day and it gave her a headache that's what stuff is like headache is better than a heart attack to be fair anyway so we stacked up with all these snacks so we had something to keep us going in case the road works are bad the traffic is bad etc etc etc now actually as it turned out the journey was pretty smooth we got to the hotel in no time at all and what did we do when we get there we parked our car kind of hidden away at the back under the trees in the shade and finished off our coke and our snacks our nasty service station snacks and then we got out of the car walked out to the front of this beautiful country house hotel where the sun was shining it had been raining in the west it was sunny in the east often happens like that in Scotland and they were serving champagne canapes on the lawn and we've been wasting our time eating trashy snacks in the shade and yet as Christians don't we sometimes do that we can seek satisfaction in this world we're not patient enough to wait or not certain enough the food will be served on time that we won't wait for the king's banquet on the castle lawn in the sun instead we have service station snacks in the shade the new creation is perfect the new creation is given it's something God does the new creation is certain and it is open so we have the patience to wait for God is making all things new in Christ so let's hold on to Christ the Lamb who has conquered as we long for our true home with Him let's pray let's pray let's pray