

The Conquering Christ

Message 12

All Things New

Revelation 21:1-22:21

Going Home

It is the last week of the semester. Are you relieved? Perhaps that depends upon how many exams, papers, and projects you have yet to complete. But soon we will be finished and ready to go home. It is a wonderful feeling, isn't it, to go home. Unless you are unfortunate enough to live in California, as Mark so vividly showed us last week. At home you are around people who love you, food is set before you, your laundry magically gets washed, you never have to clean the house. Your work is finished (at least for a few weeks) and you can rest and enjoy life. But then it is all over. Your summer job kicks in and before you know it you are back at Lehigh laboring over your books. Learning is fun, too, but also hard work. There is nothing as nice as being at home.

As we just admitted, nice as they are, the rest and comforts of home are temporary. Your home is a sign of something beyond this earth, something mysterious, some profound spiritual reality. It points to a deep longing in your soul for some rest that you never really get here on earth. Home is a dim shadow of an eternal life that you sense you need, but never quite attain. Your home is a faint reflection of that eternal home every soul longs for.

Tonight's passage takes us past the return of Christ and into eternity. It provides a picture of sublime realities that we can sense but never fully grasp. Deep in your soul you know that you are drawn to something powerful and eternal – and this is it. This is a picture of the wonder and joy of eternal life.

The Purpose of Revelation

Before we proceed, since this is our last message on Revelation, I want to review the context of our studies. We noted the first week that Revelation was written to a first-century audience about events soon to happen. Go back to that message for a full defense of that position. Here at the end you see again John emphasizing repeatedly that this vision will happen soon. It would violate the ordinary use of language to stretch "soon" into thousands of years. God does not play word tricks with us. To his first-century readers, John's visions perfectly matched events that took place between A.D. 30 and A.D. 70. Our best estimate of the date of this book is early in the decade of the A.D. 60s. The end which he prophesied was the end of Jerusalem, the end of Old Covenant worship, the end of Old Covenant Israel, and the end of the Jewish threat to the church. During this 40-year period between A.D. 30 and A.D. 70 the church was terribly persecuted by the Jews and the Romans. John's purpose in writing, in other words Jesus' purpose in sending this book, was to comfort and encourage a church which was seeing many of its members being killed for their faith. Jesus is telling the first Christians that by remaining faithful unto death they will conquer the beasts who are persecuting them – just as Jesus conquered sin and Satan by His death.

There are several topics we have not covered in our study this semester but which are often discussed in a study of Revelation. These include the rapture, the Antichrist, and the bodily return of Jesus. The rapture and the bodily return of Jesus are implied in chapter 20, and we mentioned them in passing last week. But we will do no more than that, because Revelation does not address them directly. I do want to say that these are biblical doctrines, and you can find them in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Some people are spreading the false teaching that Jesus has returned and that *all* scripture was fulfilled in the first century. They say there will be no future return of Jesus. This is a lie. Go read Thessalonians. The reason this is not developed in Revelation is that the bodily return of Jesus pertains to the end of time, and Revelation was written for and about the first century. (There is a sense in which the events of A.D. 70 were the return of Jesus in the form of Roman armies. This is what Jesus prophesied in the Olivet Discourse. For more on this see my

essay “The Day of the Lord” at www.ruf-lu.org/articles.htm.) The Antichrist is discussed in 1 John. I see no evidence that there will be a single Antichrist figure in the future, although it is possible. Clearly this is not an important point. Read 1 John to learn the real meaning and importance of antichrist.

Each week we have seen that the first-century context of Revelation is no hindrance to its application today. The fact that it is a prophecy of events that are past for us actually makes it easier for us to apply. Our calling is not to wait for Jesus to return, but to follow Him as His faithful witnesses – just as the first-century Christians did. And the same promises and encouragement that Jesus gave to them apply to us in our own settings. As we stand firm against the enemies of Jesus, we have His promise that He will make us mighty conquerors. We are sure that eventually our enemies will be defeated through our witness. This is a very powerful and active application which propels us out into the world to serve Christ.

New Heaven and Earth

This vision of paradise is greater than the sum of its parts, but we shall begin by examining a few of those parts. It is curious that the first feature of the new heaven and earth that is mentioned is the absence of the sea. Since this is a book of symbols, we have no reason to think this means the oceans of water will disappear. So what does the sea symbolize? We have consistently recognized the sea as a symbol for the Gentiles¹. So the first meaning of the disappearing sea is that there will be no more Gentiles. Does that mean that most of us have no chance of entering paradise? No. The term “Gentile” only has meaning in contrast to Israel. In the Old Covenant Gentiles were all those not part of Israel. In the New Covenant Israel no longer exists. I do not mean there are no longer any ethnic Jews. The Jews today are an ethnic group like Swedes, or Han Chinese, or Tamils, or Hutus. With the coming of Jesus and the installation of the New Covenant, the Jewish race has no special religious significance. This also means that the modern state of Israel has no special place in God’s plan. Paul said in the letter to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) In his letter to the Ephesians he said,

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

In this period God used Paul and the other apostles to take the believing Jews and Gentile believers and form them into one church. Where there had in the past been Jew and Gentile, now there are only Christians. As God says everywhere in scripture, all people are saved only by believing in Jesus. With Old Covenant distinctions erased, there are no more Gentiles.

More fundamentally, the sea is a symbol of wickedness and chaos. In the beginning the sea was pictured as a challenge to God’s rule. “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2) Isaiah used the sea as a symbol for the wicked. “But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.” (Isaiah 57:20) There is no wickedness in paradise. Finally, there is a sea that is a barrier between heaven and earth. Ezekiel described this heavenly sea as a crystal firmament, or expanse. (Ezekiel 1:22-28) He was looking up through the expanse, but we have seen it from above. It is the glass sea around the throne. (Revelation 4:6; 15:2) This glass sea which separated heaven and earth is no more. From now on earth and heaven are joined. The throne of God is in the midst of His people.

¹ For a full treatment of this subject, see message five in this series.

Next we see the New Jerusalem. Old Jerusalem, that is Babylon, turned against God and was destroyed. New Jerusalem is a holy city. She is also the bride of the Lamb. (Note again how John uses his symbols interchangeably.) The third element of this vision is the 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.” (Revelation 21:3) This is a consequence of the marriage of the bride and the Lamb. Formerly the bride was isolated on earth, under the crystal sea, apart from God. Now the sea has vanished, earth and heaven are joined, and she lives with her husband.

The rest of chapter 21 beginning at verse 9 and into chapter 22 verse 5 is a detailed view of the New Jerusalem. Its measurements are all multiples of 12 – the number symbol for the people of God. But they are multiples – squared or multiplied by 1,000 – which indicates the vast number of inhabitants of this city. It is a cube, just like the holy of holies – the inner sanctuary of the temple. Verse two called it “the holy city”. In paradise the whole city is holy – not just a small room in the temple. Everyone can enter there – not just the high priests. And we even live there always – unlike the old high priests who could enter only once a year. The holy of holies is where God’s throne was located, between the golden cherubim – but this city has the heavenly throne with the living cherubim guarding it.

The holy city is beautiful beyond description. The pearl gates, gold streets, and jeweled walls are an attempt to express the overwhelming splendor of this place. The jewels are the stones that represented the tribes of Israel on the breastplate of the high priest. Now they are incorporated into the city itself. The bride of the Lamb is not a concrete jungle like our cities, but a vast urban park – a garden city. All the features of the Garden of Eden are found here. But unlike Eden, it is a fully matured civilization teeming with people. God’s command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth has been fulfilled. Here is the river, but now it is the river of the water of life. Ezekiel saw the river flowing from the temple, but now we see it flowing directly from the throne. Here is the tree of life – but not just one tree. There are trees everywhere, producing fruit in abundance and leaves that heal the nations. Now there is no curse. Man has borne the curse for sin in the form of sweat on his forehead ever since Adam. The high priest wore God’s name on his forehead as a sign of salvation to come, but now the curse is erased and all people wear God’s name on our foreheads. The crowning touch is the eternal light that comes from the presence of God. With God enlightening us we will reign forever in this dazzling city.

Earth Renewed

By now you may be wondering why all this talk of rivers and trees. Don’t we go to heaven when we die? Isn’t eternity a never-ending praise jam like we saw in many earlier chapters in this book? No, it is not. I do not blame Huck Finn for not wanting to go to heaven as Miss Watson described it. The prospect of spending eternity strumming a harp on a cloud bored him, as it would any red-blooded boy. Notice that eternity is not spent floating around in heaven. It is spent on earth. It is a new earth, but it is a very physical place. The biblical view of humanity is a spirit-flesh union. God did not make man a spirit and then give him a body as an after thought, or as a temporary convenience. This is a pagan idea, which commanded a huge following under the name Gnosticism in the second to fourth centuries. Man is a spirit-body union, and he needs a physical earth to live in.

Furthermore, this passage as a whole indicates that the new heavens and earth will not be created from nothing, like the first creation, but will be this earth renewed. In verse five God says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” He did not say, “I am making all new things.” Verse 24 describes all the wealth of the earth coming into the New Jerusalem, which indicates that God will preserve the best of this world and incorporate it into the next.

Most people have the idea that this planet will burn up and God will create a new planet. This idea comes from science fiction and a poor understanding of scripture. The scripture that leads to this view is 2

Peter 3:10-12.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

The critical word is the Greek word στοιχείον. It means elements, basic principles, elemental spirits. We think of elements as the building blocks of matter: hydrogen, oxygen, etc. We are less accustomed to using the word “element” for a foundational principle, as in “the elements of Hebrew.” This word is used five other times in the New Testament (Galatians 4:3,9; Colossians 2:8,20; Hebrews 5:12), where it is translated “elementary principles”, “elemental spirits”, and “basic principles.” Peter is using prophetic language to describe the end of the world as we know it. The Day of the Lord is the second coming of Jesus, when He will defeat the dragon, throw him into the lake of fire, and establish His throne forever. It will be an entirely new world. It will be purified of sin and cleansed of all wickedness. It will operate on fundamental principles of righteousness and holiness – entirely different than the fundamental principles of the world in which we live now. It will be the same planet, but renewed in holiness and fit for eternity.

Our last point about the New Jerusalem is that it is always coming from heaven. Notice that John saw it descending in verse two and also in verse 10. There will come a day when Jesus returns physically, throws Satan into the lake of fire, and renews the universe. There is another sense in which the opening of heaven is a process that extends throughout the millennium. As you go back through this passage you see references to the wicked not entering the gates. Chapter 21:27 says, “Nothing unclean will ever enter it...” and 22:2 says the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations. These verses indicate that there is a partial fulfilment of the new heavens and the new earth now. For two thousand years the Spirit of God has been improving the condition of life on earth, and for two thousand years God has been opening heaven and coming down to meet us. This happens when the angels of the church – the pastors – call the people together in the name of Christ, preach to them in the name of Christ, give them the body and blood of Christ, and send them forth in the name of Christ. Each Lord’s Day heaven opens and we enjoy the marriage supper of the Lamb with Jesus. Someday everyday will be the Lord’s Day! Come Lord Jesus!

Covenant Fulfilled

I love cities and I love the country. I am fascinated by the architectural marvels you can find in cities. Even here in little Bethlehem there are buildings which grab your interest. And in the country you are surrounded by majestic trees and lush flowers and amazing animals. If you love the city, you will be enchanted by the New Jerusalem. And If you love the country, you will likewise be delighted by the New Earth. Paradise will be beautiful beyond words, but that is far from the best of it. The real joy and satisfaction of paradise is seeing Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, you already know Him. Tonight He is speaking to you through the scripture we read and the words I am saying. He has called you to abandon your sin, leave your old life, and follow Him. Everywhere you go He goes with you – leading you, comforting you, encouraging you. But something is yet missing. As physical beings, we long to see Jesus face to face. If you believe in Jesus, whether you realize it or not, that is the deepest longing of your soul. And in paradise you will be fully satisfied – you will see Jesus.

Many people misunderstand the nature of God’s covenant. From the beginning God instituted a covenant with His people, and He renewed it several times throughout history. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are packed with the laws God gave His people, and sometimes we get the idea that God’s covenant was mainly a means of keeping people in line. This is entirely wrong. The

covenant God made with man was not primarily a governing document like a constitution, although it did contain many civil laws. The covenant was a personal bond between God and man. Let's take Abraham as an example. God called Abraham to follow Him, and God made powerful promises. He promised to lead Abraham to a new land and make a great nation of him. Then later God made a covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 17:7-8 we read...

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

Notice here that the core of the covenant is that God will be the God of Abraham and his children. For all the centuries following, God was faithful to His covenant – to be a God to His people. Moses repeated this promise and enlarged it in Leviticus 26:11-12: “I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” This is the goal of the covenant – that God will be our God, and we shall be His people. It is a perpetual bond of faithfulness. God will never abandon us, and we will never worship another God. God was always faithful to the covenant, but man was often unfaithful. Down through the ages the prophets foresaw a day in which the covenant would be fully realized. Someday man will be faithful, and perfect harmony will exist between God and man.

And so Revelation 21:3 is a cry of triumph! The real goal of history – the ultimate purpose behind everything has been achieved. “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.” This was the reason for all those laws in the Old Testament. This is why God raised up David to be king in Israel. This is why He sent the prophets, sent Israel into exile and brought her back. This is why God sent Jesus – to make real the promise of a perfect bond between God and man. The bond of perfect unity that marriage imperfectly shows is now perfected. The fairy tale has come true!

Revelation in the 21st Century

Revelation is a very complex book, but its message is so simple a child can grasp it. We can sum it up in three ways. One way of saying it is “Jesus rules! Jesus wins! You win!” Another summary is “Jesus is the faithful witness. You be a faithful witness.” Or to use different terms, “Jesus conquers by the word of his testimony. You conquer by the word of Jesus’ testimony.”

Whatever else you think about this book, a couple of things are clear. First, Jesus is active in this world. Satan does not rule the world. Jesus does. And Jesus does whatever He wants to do. No one, not even Satan, can oppose Him. Second, Jesus uses us, His saints, to accomplish His work. Our lives are not purposeless. Our actions make a real difference in history.

With the message of Revelation before us we can make some concluding applications – three negative and three positive. First, do not spend your life waiting for Jesus to rapture you out of your troubles. It is probably not going to happen. We do not know when Jesus will return, and it is foolish to speculate about it. The signs of the end in the New Testament pertain to the end of the Old Covenant, not to Jesus’ final return. Furthermore, the more faithful you are, the more your troubles may increase in this life. It is unfaithful to Jesus to simply wait for Him to airlift you out of this life. Second, do not grow satisfied with this life. In America today you are less likely to be persecuted than to be seduced. God has given us enormous blessings, and it would be monstrously ungrateful of us to despise them. So enjoy the life you presently have. Enjoy it without guilt. But this is not paradise. This is the old earth corrupted by sin, ready to be destroyed. This is not your home, so do not become at home here. Third, do not be a coward.

Revelation 21:8 lists the wicked people that will burn forever in the lake of fire. Leading the list are the cowards. This does not mean that you are in trouble if you fear persecution. Fear is a natural response to danger, and some of us fear more than others. The issue is not whether you fear persecution, but how you handle your fear. Bravery is not the lack of fear, but the refusal to be ruled by fear. In the end cowards fear something else more than God. In other words, they do not trust God. They do not believe. If you wish to enter paradise, you must not give in to your fears. You must not be a coward.

And now we have three positive applications. First, repent of your sin. Are you a coward? Do you fear persecution? Do you love comfort more than Jesus? Jesus said you should fear God more than man, for only God can destroy you forever in hell. But the good news is that Jesus died to conquer the power of sin. You can stop being a coward – but not on your own power. No one has the power to conquer sin and death except Jesus. If you trust Jesus, He will give you a new life – a life fit for the new heavens and the new earth. Repent of your evil ways and ask Jesus to save you.

Second, feast with your Lover. The Song of Solomon is about the love between a man and a woman. But it also applies to the love between the heavenly bride and groom. Let me read a few verses.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine...Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine.... (Song of Solomon 1:2,4)

As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste, He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. (Song of Solomon 2:3-4)

Enjoy Jesus. Bask in His love. Let the Bible be His love letter to you. Let the sermon this Sunday be the declaration of His love for you. Let the Lord's Supper be the wedding feast with your very own magnificent husband.

Third, ride forth with your Lover to conquer. Jesus is a mighty warrior, and His bride rides with Him into battle. The bride of Christ is not a silly, frilly woman, but a warrior queen. Do not sit at home watching soap operas while your lover is on the battlefield. Get your weapons and get out there with Him. A whole campus lies before you. Whole cities are oppressed by Satan. Whole nations are mired in darkness waiting for the armies of heaven to come rescue them. You are that army! Pray for God to deploy you in some important battle station and enable you to conquer sin and set your people free.

This is what John saw. This is the message of Jesus. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.

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