

Sermon 57: Revelation 21:1-4: The New Creation

OUTLINE

God's new creation
God's tabernacling
God's presence

INTRODUCTION

In our naturalistic worldview, the future ends in a big bang, crunch or freeze. Much more of the same will come and the end of human existence is inevitable in one way or another. This is very different to the view of the future that the Bible gives. We have a supernatural view of the future not a uniformitarian view. God will break in and interrupt time as we know, life as we know it, death as we know it, pain as we know it, sin as we know it. He is coming to make all things new 21:5. The future that we look forward to, the one for which all of creation is groaning is a creation free from satan, sin and death. This new creation was what was pictured in the Garden of Eden, but we get better than Adam lost; it is what was badly pictured in the new world Noah stepped into after coming out of the Ark; it was the real substance of the promise to Abraham when God promised him land; Israel was a sinful portrait of what it would look like to be in God's presence; David's imperfect reign was a glimpse of living under God's Lordship freed from all enemies; the prophets spoke of this coming creation in terms of the OT covenantal context; Christ showed us in His earthly ministry what a creation without demons, sin, death and satan looks like; New Creation power was inaugurated with the resurrection of Christ; the church at Pentecost experienced a partial inbreaking of this creation in God taking up residence in our hearts, but we are all still looking and longing for the full and final fulfilment that all of these things anticipate, the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Satan, sin and death have been destroyed and now God wants to tell His hurting people what will be coming next. He puts the light at the end of the tunnel in focus and fixes our hopes on the wonderful things that are to come. What we are about to see are the deepest longings and needs of our hearts fulfilled, the very purpose of our creation satisfied. We will see that the pot at the end of the rainbow is God Himself as our God and all that entails.

God's new creation

V1, 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.' At the end of the last chapter we saw creation flee from the face of Christ. We understand that to be the purging by fire that Peter spoke of in 2 Pet. 3:10. In the place of the old creation we find a new creation. It is often discussed what this will be. There are those who think that there is a destruction and then a creation ex nihilo, and there is the view that all things are renovated. Arguing on the basis of our own bodies which are destroyed in death and then the same bodies are raised into glorified ones, we understand that the new creation is not created ex nihilo but out of the old creation. This is not a random guess but is taken from the words of Paul in Romans 8:19-21, 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.' Creation as our inheritance participates in our glorification just as it participated in our fall.

Next we see that there will be no sea in the new creation. This is not an attempt to accurately describe a geology that has not experienced the flood and anticipating a world without tectonic plates and a much milder set of geological features. It is not supporting the theory that the flood waters came from under the earth and are a residue of judgement from the flood and the earth will be restored to such a state. No in the book of revelation the sea is the place that the beast arose from, 13:1; it is the place over which Babylon rules representing the sinful nations, 17:1; 15. All of this of course springs from Daniel's vision where the four beasts arise from the sea 7:3. This is a theological point represented in symbols not a reporter's reporting of the facts.

Next we are told of the New Jerusalem dressed as a bride. No doubt this is a mixing of metaphors but the meaning is deep. Jerusalem was the centre of politics, religion, law and culture in Israel and now it is the symbol of the new people of God in the new creation. It was the place where God dwelt in the temple and now replacing the temple is God Himself and blessing never known by the old Jerusalem constitute the life of those in the new. The adorning of the bride is the glory of the glorification the bride has undergone. God has resurrected the church and she is now dressed in true righteousness, she has the pure and full beauty of the perfected image of God in Christ in her. She is ready to begin her long communion with God. She has been made fit for the King. God's grace will one day take all that we are, all the imperfect worship, all the love of sin, all the shame and filth and remake us for eternal love in His presence.

God's tabernacling

V3, 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them....' The throne of God announces the new state of affairs that God's dwelling place is no longer apart from sinful man but with glorified man. The depth of this statement can be appreciated when we see that the word dwelling place is in fact the word for tabernacle. This notion of tabernacle has been a rich vein of truth from Eden to Revelation, this notion of God making a home with us is a consistent line from the beginning of our story to the eternal future. God and man had a home together in Eden, but it was conditional because Adam could sin and break that arrangement. Adam sinned and humanity was orphaned and cast from its home in God's direct presence from the Garden. God would now come in grace to fallen humanity and visited the patriarchs who worshipped God as wanderers waiting for the day the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. From Adam to Moses there was an increase in promises but not an increase in concrete fellowship. Things changed dramatically when God rescued Israel from Egypt. God set up a tabernacle where His presence would be in the midst of His people. However, only the priests could go into the temple and only the High Priest once a year into the holy of holies. God was in their midst but it was a terrifying ordeal. We are sinners and cannot be in the presence of God without punishment being rained down upon us. So God set up the sacrificial system as a statement to show that sinners can only dwell with a holy God on the basis of a sacrifice paying for their sins first, all in anticipation of the sacrifice of Christ. The Israelites went from being desert dwellers to inhabiting the land and the tabernacle was replaced with a temple. But things essentially remained the same in terms of God being in their midst but still at a distance from the people. God took a dramatic step closer to us in the person of Christ and as it is described in John 1:14, 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.' Just as God Himself will one day do. But realise that Christ has veiled His glory in flesh, He has come in order to be the great sacrifice that restores us to Eden. He lives and dies and is raised in order to pay for our sins and to make us children of God who can dwell in His home with Him. And on account of Christ we enter into a phase of dwelling with God unprecedented. Christ sends His Spirit to make each one of us a part

of His body, a part of the temple of God and God Himself by the Spirit comes to live in every single one of our hearts. We enter into a sphere of fellowship more intimate and gracious than the High Priest, we are all children and houses of God by the indwelling Spirit. Ordinary physical barriers have been overcome by the Spirit to make us all one temple and individually intimate with God. But this is not the end of the story. The end comes when all curtains are removed and as intimate as any perfected creature can be with the infinite God, we will know that intimacy in the new creation. We are tasting some of that reality by the indwelling Spirit but we will know something more than Adam knew as we dwell with God and have the Holy Spirit with us forever. In prayer and worship we catch a scent of the meal that is to come, God does at times give us stronger senses of the blessings that are ours, but then there will be no barriers and the full reality will be upon us.

God's presence

V3, 'And 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.' What is the best part of heaven going to be? God! 'He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.' God first and then His benefits that is how these verses list the centre piece of the New creation. In rom. 5:11, Paul listed the fact that we rejoice in God after having once hated Him as a climactic blessing of our salvation, this is better still, we do not merely rejoice in the God we once hated, we get to be with Him and have Him in His fullness with no sin, no ignorance, no flesh, no devil, and no death disrupting our intimacy. All that He is will be for us, no partial blessings, no disruptions.

This promise has a rich history the wording of which began with God's promises to Abraham, Gen. 17:2-8. It was a promise repeated to Israel who experienced an imperfect version of it in the land. The prophets promised that this promise would be expanded to include the Gentiles, e.g. Zech. 2:2. It became a central aspect of God's future plan for His people in His end time rescuing of them Ezek. 37:27. It was inaugurated with the coming of Pentecost 2 Cor. 6:16 and experienced by the Christian, but will be consummated in the new creation. Please notice in the footnote that people could be peoples, this reinforces the expansion of this promise to include the nations. This is the blessing to the nations that was promised to Abraham.

We move then from the central blessing of being with God to the benefits that flow from that. V4, '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.'" Now we have the future explained in the form of several negatives. Why is it put in this form? Because the present experience of the 1st century church was marked by the dominance of these things in their witness for Christ.

We see firstly, that God Himself, personally wipes away every single tear from our eyes. You can try and picture this as a long line of people and God at the speed of light with an endless tissue box drying our tears but you will miss the point by trying to visualise it. The picture is one of a people who appeared to be abandoned by God and went through tough times, but in the end God Himself will comfort them, console them, and make everything right. The truth is larger than one emotion filled moment, this is referring to the undoing of all that caused us deep emotional and physical pain. It is the swallowing up of all our pain in the infinite joy of heaven. We need to appreciate that the positive should be read here, such as, Psalm 16:11, 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' Isaiah 35:10, 'And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be

upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' Don't picture this day as a day when everyone is weeping and God is running around as the omnipresent comforter. This is truth stated in the negative.

Death we are told will be no more. Jesus Himself wept at the pain of losing a loved one and was angry at the disruption death caused.

All funerals will be done with, no more mourning, nor crying. We will only know happiness and feasting by contrast.

No more pain. Now this one is hard to understand. Must we think that our bodies will not feel the heat of fire, will we be able to run into walls? I don't think that is the point. No more pain refers to no more causes of pain and only reasons for rejoicing.

Life as we once knew it, the former things will pass away. Authority with pride, buying and selling with greed, love with possessiveness, servanthood with resentment, life with death, work with thorns and thistles, knowing with ignorance, worship with coldness, neighbours with divisions, technology without morality, all God's good gifts will be purified and given back to us in their wholeness. And every sinful thing will be eradicated.

Isaiah 65:17-25 was the OT picture of these things, but still had death, sinners, aging and other normal experiences of this life. Here we see the fullness of the promise at the end of progressive revelation superseding the restrictions of that promise to a level above what was expected as God in His abundant grace oversupplies and our cups run over. This is the longing every heart has fulfilled. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. We do not know complete rest even as Christians until this day comes and then we will know it without end.