

This morning we continue Revelation's description of what the saints can look forward to in the final state when God will bring to completion their salvation and the renewal of all things. Last week we looked at this idea of the new heaven and the new earth. This morning we begin with the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven.

Revelation 21:2 says, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." There is a delightful mixing of metaphors here. John speaks about a city which is prepared as a bride for her husband. The city is also a bride. In the Bible the name "Jerusalem" can refer to the actual city of Jerusalem, but it can also stand for the people of Israel and then in the NT to all the people of God. And here in Revelation 21, we see how the symbolism of Jerusalem as the people of God is fulfilled when God brings his plan of salvation to completion. John sees "the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God." He is speaking about the church, the people of God, but specifically the people of God as the place where God dwells. There is a sense in which the new Jerusalem is both a place and a people.

The idea of the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven teaches that the separation between heaven and earth will no longer exist in the new heaven and new earth. The heavenly Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God at the present time, but this verse describes that heavenly Jerusalem coming down out of heaven so that there is no more separation between heaven and earth. This is a picture of heaven coming down to earth. God's people with God dwelling in the midst of them living on the new earth. Heaven and earth come together because God is dwelling with his people.

The city is called the holy city and the bride is described as being "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." The people of God in the final state are completely holy. When they believed in Jesus, they received the righteousness of Christ so that at that moment they were declared righteous before God, but they do not become personally holy in an instant. We are born again. We receive a holy nature. But while we are in this life, we have the ongoing task of putting sin to death and growing in holiness through the power of the Spirit. That process is completed when we die and are glorified. This verse describes the people of God from the perspective of their glorification. The new Jerusalem is a holy city. And the bride has been prepared adorned for her husband.

It is very encouraging that here the Bible is speaking about the bride as having been prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. This corresponds to what we read of Jesus doing in Ephesians 5:25-27. There we read that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Revelation 21:2 is describing Christ presenting the church to himself after he has finished his work to make her holy and without blemish.

While we are on earth we must work at growing in holiness and that is hard work and we can often be discouraged because progress is so slow. It is not easy to fight against sin in our lives and to pursue godliness. But this language of “the holy city” and the bride as prepared for her husband reflects the truth that God is at work in his people to make them holy and he will accomplish the goal of making us holy and without blemish. Paul writes of this in Philippians 1:6 where he says, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Revelation 21:2 describes the completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

This is a great encouragement for us. Even though we do not grow without our own effort, God is working in our lives and the work he is doing will be completed. God uses all kinds of means for this. The Holy Spirit is working in us directly – giving us the desire and the strength to live the Christian life and gradually to grow. He uses the word and the sacraments and prayer to nurture our growth. God also directs our lives providentially so that we are constantly being faced with circumstances that are occasions for growth. The hard things in our lives are occasions for growth. The temptations in our lives are occasions for growth. God uses the encouragement of other believers as well as their example to nurture our growth in holiness. Throughout our lives God is at work gradually shaping us to be more and more like Jesus.

One day you are going to be perfectly holy and the church as a whole will be perfectly holy. On the day that John is seeing in his vision, we together as the church, will be holy and without blemish. And God will delight in us. He delights in us already as the bride of Christ because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, but there are still things about us that he does not delight in because we still sin. But when the holy city come down out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband all the stains and blemishes of sin will be gone and God will delight in his church as his perfectly holy people. That is a thought to encourage our hearts as we struggle against sin. We must struggle. We must seek to grow. But at the same time God is working in us and directing all the circumstances of our lives so that we will grow in holiness and maturity and one day he is going to bring that work to its completion.

Verse 3 describes the ultimate goal of salvation. “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.’” The idea of God dwelling with his people and being their God is one that runs through the Scriptures. Before the fall, God was with Adam and Eve in the garden. After the fall they were banished from the garden and from God’s presence. The covenant that God made Abraham and with Israel was about God being their God and they being his people. The tabernacle in the wilderness and later the temple were where God dwelt in the midst of his people. John 1:14 says about Jesus, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....” All of this comes to its culmination in the new heaven and earth when God makes his dwelling place with man as his people and he is with them as their God.

In this present age, God is with his people. He is our God and we are his people. But like so much else in salvation, these realities are brought to a whole new level when God brings his salvation to its culmination. One writer expresses it like this: “[D]irect, unmarred fellowship between God and his people is the goal of all redemption.” (Ladd p. 277) Another writes summarizes the idea in these words, “[I]n the age to come, the longing of every spirit to know God and see his face will be perfectly fulfilled. The communion that God has eternally purposed to enjoy with his people will be achieved.”

We get some sense of this in our relationships with other people. Being with people we love brings us joy. One of the things that bothers us the most about this pandemic is that it hinders our ability to be with others. The marriage relationship comes even closer to what God is talking about here about the age to come. Two people who love each other dwell together and belong to one another. The joy of dwelling together and belonging to one another as humans gives us a sense of what it means that God will be our God and we will be his people and that he will dwell with us without any barriers – with without any hindrances – without any of the separation that is caused by sin.

We are made and saved to enjoy being with God. We are made and saved to enjoy being in his presence and worshipping him. We are made and saved to belong to the people who are God’s people and who relate to him as their God. And that will be experienced in perfection in the age to come. Psalm 16:11 gives some idea of this when David sings, “[I]n your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” We experience that to some extend during this present age. We will experience it in perfection in the age to come.

And when you have the new heaven and the new earth with no more sea, when you have the people of God perfected in holiness, and when you have God dwelling with his people, you no longer have suffering. Verse 4, “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.”

One of the great challenges of the Christian life is suffering. We are saved. Our sins are forgiven. God looks upon us with love and favor. You might expect that that would mean that we would be spared suffering. And to be sure we are spared some suffering because of salvation because living God’s way helps us avoid some of the suffering that results from ungodly living. But clearly Christians still suffer greatly. When it comes to persecution, Christians as a whole suffer more than unbelievers. But we also suffer in all kinds of other ways. We get sick. We lose loved ones. We experience failure and rejection and many other hard things.

God certainly does not promise us an easy life in the here and now. A big part of the Christian life is dealing with suffering and difficulties with trust and submission and confidence in God’s love. But all that will end in the coming age for the people of God. And the language is tender. “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes....” God himself will tenderly wipe the tears from our eyes. The picture is that of a parent tenderly wiping away the tears of a child.

So we suffer knowing that the suffering will not last forever. That is true for believers in Jesus, not everyone. Those who are not saved, will suffer eternally, but those who have followed Jesus, who are part of the new Jerusalem, will forever be free of any pain and sorrow.

Part of that picture is that “death shall be no more.” Death entered the world because of sin. Jesus by his life, death and resurrection, conquered sin, and death. 1 Corinthians 15:27 says, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

It is a wonderful part of salvation that Jesus has won the victory over death. Death is the result of sin. Sin and death are ultimate cause of all suffering. Jesus conquered sin and death by paying the penalty of sin and by fulfilling the law as the representative of his people. The wages of sin is death. Jesus paid those wages by dying. The requirement for all human beings is keeping the law of God. Jesus met that requirement by his perfect sinless life. And the result of that is that sin and death are conquered for believers in Jesus. That does not mean that we will not die physically, but it does mean that there will be no death in the new heaven and new earth.

Death is still an enemy for us in this life. The fact that we must die hangs over each of our lives. Life is so very precious, but the fact that this life is temporary, casts a shadow over our lives. As we travel through life, we lose loved ones and friends and as we age we feel our bodies breaking down and we know how that ends. Death is the last enemy. But here in Revelation 21 we are reminded that death has been defeated. Death will not have the last word. In the age to come “Death shall be no more.” We will live forever having been raised from the dead in the new heaven and new earth, serving God without sin and enjoying his presence and his love and favor without interruption.

And there will be no more suffering. No more dying. No more sickness. No more fighting. No more tears or crying or pain. That is a great help to endure suffering and pain at the present time. It is possible to endure hard things if we understand them to be temporary and that there is a time coming when we will experience perfect peace and joy and wholeness in the presence of God. Endurance is related to hope and this is our hope that suffering is temporary and that what lies beyond suffering is eternal blessedness in the presence of God.

It is important to see, however, that the picture that John is painting here is one picture and that all of its elements go together. There are many people who have some kind of hope of a better life in the next life. Many people have embraced the hope of a life without suffering beyond this life without embracing the rest of the picture. But that is a false hope. The place where there will be no more death and where tears will be wiped away is a new heaven and a new earth where there is no more sea – meaning no more evil. The people who will live there will be a holy people having been prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And the greatest joy of that place will be the presence of God.

The new heaven and new earth are not a place where people who are not holy and are not in love with God live without suffering. Delighting in God is the great joy of the new heaven and the new earth and it is a holy place where sin has been banished. We must understand the promise of no more tears in the light of the whole picture. If there is no pursuit of holiness now and if there is no relationship with God now, there is no basis for expecting no more tears in the hereafter. The reason there is suffering in the here and now is sin and separation from God. The reason there will be no more suffering in the hereafter is that through what Jesus has accomplished, his people are delivered from their sins and restored into relationship with God. The only place where there will be no more suffering and weeping is the place where people love and serve God with all their hearts and thus are holy.

What that means is that if you are not striving for holiness now and if you have no desire for fellowship with God now, you have no reason to think that you will enjoy the no more tears in the hereafter. This is a call therefore to turn to the Lord, to seriously consider the reality of your situation and to come to Jesus for salvation and to begin the battle for holiness and begin nurturing a relationship with God. This passage makes it clear that those who will experience God wiping the tears from their eyes are those in whom he is working at the present time to make them holy.

And one of the ways that God does that is through suffering. God uses suffering in our lives for our growth in endurance and trust and holiness. In very general sense we experience suffering in this life because we live in a world under the curse of sin. Part of God's way with his saved people is that he uses suffering for our spiritual growth. But that will be over in the new heaven and new earth. And that is of great comfort in suffering – or at least it can be. It is not easy or automatic, but one of God's purposes in telling us that there will be no more tears and pain in the new heaven and new earth is to give us hope in the suffering that we must endure in the present. But to experience that hope and to be comforted by it, we need to be growing in our love for God and our desire to be with him. The more that our hearts are tied to the good things of this life, the less will be our comfort in the promise of the blessedness of the age to come.

But the more we grow in our love for God and the more we grow in delighting in God, the more of a comfort it will be for us to think about the blessedness of living a holy life in the presence of God in the new heaven and new earth. There is a curious relationship between our legitimate attachments to this world and looking forward to the blessedness of the new creation. Certainly it is not wrong to want to live a long life on this earth. Certainly it is not wrong to do what we can to extend our lives here on earth.

And yet salvation is about loving God more and more and more and desiring to be in his presence. Passages like this are in the Bible to give us hope for living in a world without sin in perfect fellowship with God. The whole of the biblical teaching about hope is about a future that is better than the present. Hebrews 11:16 describes the OT saints as desiring "a better country, that is a heavenly one." Hebrews 13:14 says, "For here

we have no lasting city but we seek the city that is to come.” The book of Revelation is going to end with the words, “Come Lord Jesus!”

When we think of how a text like the one we are dwelling on should impact us, it is clear that it should increase our desire to experience the glories that it describes. Think of the sentiment expressed by Asaph in Psalm 73:25, “Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

John Calvin deals with this subject in his Institutes. He has a whole chapter in his Institutes of the Christian Religion called “Meditation on the Future Life” and the subtitle of that chapter is “(By our tribulations God Weans Us from Excessive Love of This Present Life).” This language of excessive love of this present life is helpful. It is not wrong to love this present life, but it is wrong to love it excessively.

He makes quite a point of saying that we should not hate this present life and that we would be grateful for all God’s blessing to us in it, but he stresses that through meditating on the future life and thinking of the shortness of this life and its miseries, the balance should shift away from excessive love of this life to increasing desires for the life to come. At one places he says, “Now whatever is taken away from the perverse love of this life ought to be added to the desire for a better one.” He is saying that by meditating on the future life the balance will shift so that our desire for this life will be less and our desire for the next life will be more.

The idea can be expressed using the idea of a old fashioned balance scale. The weight of our desires must shift away from loving this life to looking forward to what is to come. We tend to love this life too much and the life to come too little. Calvin is saying, don’t stop loving this life, but seek to love it less compared to the better life that is to come.

Here is another quote: “If to enjoy the presence of God is the summit of happiness, is not to be without this, misery? But until we leave the world “we are away from the Lord” [2 Cor. 5:6]. Therefore, if the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, it is doubtless to be at once despised and trampled under foot.” Calvin does not mean that we should literally despise this life. In the context he speaks about being thankful for the blessings of this life and says that we should not hate this life. He is speaking comparatively. Compared to enjoying the presence of God in the new creation, the best that this world offers is misery. The overall point is that meditating on the future life is one of the ways that we can fight against excessive attachment to this life and nurture our desires for the next.

Calvin is reflecting Scripture here in his thoughts about the importance of meditating on the future life. Remember how Paul in Philippians 1 Paul spoke of his desire to depart and be with Christ “for that [he said] is far better.” In Romans 8:23 he said, “[W]e ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly, as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” In 2 Corinthians 5:2 he writes, “For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.”

The passage that we are looking at this morning which speaks about the holy city coming down out of heaven, and God dwelling with his people and God wiping away every tear from our eyes is in the Bible to nurture and strengthen our hope. And Calvin's insight is helpful in using a text like this to strengthen our desire for the future life and to help us to be overly attached to this earthly life.

Ed Welch in his book on depression makes the same point when he says, "We were created to enjoy the many things God gives without making them the center of our lives." There is a proper attachment to this life. But it is not to be more important to us than God and our desire to be in his presence. And so an important part of Christian growth is to become less attached to this life and to long more for the life to come.

That is one of the reasons for taking our time with these last two chapters of the Bible. They give us the most detail about the new creation. So let's ponder these verses and the truths that they contain so that we may grow in our longing for the joys of the new creation and so that our attachment to this life might become more consistent with priority of God in our lives.