

City

Revelation 21-22

*“Once upon a time there was a man and woman who loved each other and had children...
And they all lived happily ever after... The End.”*

How do you like that story? Beautiful, right?

Of course not! That’s not a good story. That’s super lame. We all want the happy ending, but it doesn’t mean anything unless there was some major obstacle to overcome - some driving tension that was resolved.

Today we have the joy of *thinking about HEAVEN*. Praise the Lord - it will be amazing beyond what we can even imagine. **So why didn’t God just create heaven to start with?** Why not set Adam and Eve in the middle of the new heaven and earth with no serpent, no temptation, no possibility of sin - just sin-free, pain-free, suffering-free, happy fellowship with God and each other FOREVER!?!?

Would that have been a better story? God could have written the story that way. But He didn’t.

Even though life is painful and bad things happen, we know this is the best possible world - because it is the world God chose to create. And one of the main reasons we believe that is because we know how the story ends. **It ends with “happily ever after.”**

But it doesn’t start there. No good story does. ***Every good story needs a villain, a difficult problem, a hero and a dramatic finale.*** Our world has all of that and then some. Your personal story has all of that drama. And world history has multiple villains, complex layers of problems and challenges, numerous small heroes and one Super Hero. Today we will focus on the ending when that great Hero comes back to put everything right so we can - truly - “all live happily ever after.” And as we see how beautiful and satisfying the conclusion is - I pray it will encourage us to trust in our Hero and His sovereign plan through the challenges and dark times.

What we will see in **Revelation 21 and 22** today is the conclusion to the whole Bible and God’s great story of redemption.

The Bible Story

Started with...	Ends with...
A Garden	A City
One Couple	A Vast Crowd

Innocence but the potential for sin & death	Righteousness and glory w/ all sin removed
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It started in a garden and ends in a city. It started with one couple and ends with a great multitude. It started with innocence and goodness - the absence of all sin, suffering and death. And it ends with righteousness and glory - all sin removed, every tear wiped away, death fully and finally defeated.

As we've seen since we started in Genesis 1 back in January - ***the whole Bible is one story and all of it points to Jesus.*** He is the One who spoke the world into being. Jesus is the Great Hero who came in the middle of the story and shockingly laid down his life as a sacrifice. And He is the King of all Kings who will remake and restore His creation when he comes back.

What we'll see today are **three glorious descriptions of our eternal home**, followed by a ***personal invitation*** from Jesus Himself to join Him there. That is how the Bible ends so let's open our Bibles as we complete the Bible story!

If you're with me in Revelation 21 we immediately see the first description of heaven: PERFECTION.

1. The Perfection of Heaven

"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.***" Revelation 21:1

- A world without suffering or death

This whole book is called **The Revelation** because it is God's unveiling of truth. It is the final revealing, the last Word from the Lord before the canon of Scripture closed. And what a revelation it is! What a glimpse of our future glory!

Throughout these two chapters we will feel both **familiarity and freshness**. What John sees is heaven and earth - familiar to us. But what he sees is a NEW heaven and a NEW earth - not familiar! To make it especially clear John says "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." And that is what the heart of the book of Revelation describes - ***the outpouring of God's wrath on this sin-filled, rebellious world*** until the whole earth is consumed under the fire of God's righteous fury.

"The sea was no more" means ***all chaos and disorder is finally removed.*** The ocean in ancient times represented evil, chaos and death. It was utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable. The sea was a mighty and deadly power. And if you ever venture out into the ocean in a storm you will feel that mighty power for yourself. When I was young I was caught in a thunderstorm on Lake

Huron in a small sailboat with my Dad. That memory of clinging to his legs while he brought our little boat in to shore so we could shelter on land is still vivid in my mind. And that was on a lake in a relatively sheltered bay. Imagine the open ocean! Imagine a hurricane or typhoon... Experience that and you would really appreciate why ancient people saw the SEA as the symbol of chaos, evil and death.

The new heaven and new earth will be absolute PERFECTION: no more chaos or evil or darkness or fear; no more sin or temptation or suffering or death. Verse 4 says:

1. The Perfection of Heaven

“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.” Rev. 21:4

- A world without suffering or death

This re-made world will be absolutely perfect – it will be SHALOM – peace, rest, wholeness, life and joy. There will be no sin, suffering, sadness or death. Everything that was broken by the rebellion of mankind will be restored. Everything that is messed up in our world will be put right. And not only will the world be perfect – **we will be too**. Verse 2:

1. The Perfection of Heaven

“And I saw ***the holy city***, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ***prepared as a bride*** adorned for her husband.” Revelation 21:2

- A people without sin, suffering, sadness or death

Revelation 21 is primarily a description of **the church** – believers from all over the world and all of history. The church is the bride of Jesus Christ – and we are presented here as a holy city – radiant with the glory of God. The description sounds odd to our modern ears but the dimensions of a cube 1,000 miles in every direction represents absolute perfection. It is obviously ENORMOUS – larger than any city or even all cities in history combined. It is totally symmetrical. And it is dazzling with beauty – with foundations of precious stones and gates of giant pearls, streets of gold so pure they are totally clear.

Brothers and sisters – **this is how God sees us ALREADY**. We are the bride of Christ – prepared for our bridegroom – “adorned for our husband.” How is this possible? Only by His sacrifice, of course. We are “dressed in HIS righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.” All who are committed to Jesus in a covenant relationship – which is what marriage is – are united with Him in every way.

- He takes our sin and gives us His righteousness.
- He takes our weakness and gives us His strength.
- He takes our imperfection and gives us His perfection.
- And one day he will take our earthly mortality and give us His heavenly glory.

1. The Perfection of Heaven

“He showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, *having the glory of God*, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” Rev. 21:10-11

- A people filled with the righteousness and glory of God

This revelation not only shows us what is REMOVED in heaven but also what is perfectly fulfilled. Right now believers in Jesus have been JUSTIFIED – declared righteous in Christ. This means we have been given credit for His righteousness even as He has taken the punishment for our sin. To be justified is to be DECLARED righteous. But Revelation 21 gives us a preview of what it will look like to be GLORIFIED. ***To be glorified is to BE RIGHTEOUS.***

Right now we have credit for His righteousness even though we still struggle with the remaining sin in our lives. For eternity in the new heaven and earth **we will have the REALITY of His righteousness.** We will BE holy and righteous and good and loving and joyful... We will be GLORIOUS.

Joni Earackson Tada was an attractive and athletic teenager. When she was 16 she dove into water that was too shallow and broke her neck. She was paralyzed from the neck down, with very limited use of her arms and hands.

For a year she struggled with depression and anger over all she had lost. But gradually the Lord she knew about from her childhood became more and more real to her and she started to believe there was hope and purpose for her. For the last 50 years Joni has devoted her life to ministry to people like her who are affected by disability.

When asked what she most looks forward to about heaven she said, “Yes, I can’t wait for my new body - to be able to walk and paint and move freely with all of my limbs. But what I most look forward to about heaven is **finally having a heart that is free from sin.** To have no more temptation or fear, no more selfishness or desire for anything but God!”

For eternity we will be exalted above the angels. We will be radiant with the untainted, unveiled, unlimited glory of God. C.S. Lewis said ***if you saw yourself in your future glorified state you would be tempted to worship.*** Read Revelation 21 for yourself and the descriptions of precious jewels and enormous walls. All of that vividly descriptive imagery is a picture of who we will be forever. We will be LIKE JESUS in the moment we see Him face to face!

This moves us into our second description of the glories of heaven.

2. The Completion of Heaven

“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.” Rev. 21:3

- The Peace of relationship and rest

Right now we live with *so many TENSIONS* – so many pressures, confusions and challenges. But in the new heaven and earth, all tension will be resolved, all questions will be answered. It will be a place of absolute peace and rest.

The Bible word “**PEACE**” – shalom – is much bigger than our English word. Shalom is not just the absence of conflict but also the presence of wholeness, fullness and joy. Shalom is the nature of God – perfect balance, unity, harmony and life. Shalom is untainted by any worry or fear or temptation or uncertainty. This is why heaven is our great Sabbath REST.

Life is a constant cycle of work and rest; work and rest; work and rest. The creation account in Genesis one shows us this pattern is built into the very nature of God, which is why the Sabbath rest was commanded for God’s people so they would demonstrate the holiness of God to a world consumed by work, work, work.

Now is the time we are to work. We have a day of rest every week. And we need extra seasons of rest and refreshment. But eternity will be the completion of our work and the beginning of the REST we were ultimately made for.

But notice this rest is not just about not working and it’s certainly not about watching football. **This rest is centered on a RELATIONSHIP.** This rest is all about being with God Himself! And this is the ultimate resolution our hearts are longing for.

Saint Augustine said, “*Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.*” We were made for relationship with God. We feel this deep in our souls – we need Him; we long for Him. When we get a little glimpse, a little experience of His love our hearts leap. That is what heaven will be – to dwell with God. To BE WITH HIM forever and forever.

We feel this in our human relationships – especially when couples are **ENGAGED**. There is a longing to be together – a desire to be fully united. But time and space keep us apart for a season – so there is a tension in the unfulfilled relationship. Kristin and I had a full year when I was in Chicago and she was finishing school in Indiana. We were four hours apart – but I could drive it in three and a half in my little red Dodge Colt. We were eager to be together – if only for a few hours here and there.

The wedding was set for June 12 – a date we have most often celebrated by moving to a new state. The weeks and months seemed to creep by as the date approached. We could feel the distance but knew – *very soon – we would finally be together.*

That is what heaven should feel like. **The anticipation of our relationship with God** finally feeling complete and whole. CONSUMMATED. FULFILLED. Right now we see God “through a glass dimly” – like we are looking through a fogged up mirror. But then we will finally see Him face to face. Now we only know God in part – from a distance. But then we will begin to know Him fully.

Brothers and sisters – ***we are pledged to be married to Jesus Christ***. Now is the time of our engagement. When He comes back – He is coming back FOR US. And the first thing we will do is called the wedding supper of the Lamb. It will be a party unlike anything we’ve ever experienced or could ever imagine. But this passage in Revelation 21 is John’s attempt to put in words what he, no doubt, struggled to understand. Look at verse 22:

2. The Completion of Heaven

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light.” Rev. 21:22-23

- The Peace of relationship and rest

This is the consummation of all things – ***the completion of God’s work throughout history***. The temple was the place where God’s presence dwelt in Israel. It was covered in gold. It was set apart as the most holy place. It was the center of Jewish life in their worship and annual calendar. Still today the temple mount is the most holy place for the Jewish people. My parents were just there on a tour and experienced prayer at **the Western Wall** – or the wailing wall – which is as close as any Jew can get to where the temple should be.

Still today the Jewish people feel ***that longing for the presence of God***. That longing will finally be fulfilled in this new heaven and new earth – not in a physical temple; not in a shiny gold covered building – but in the glorious presence of God Himself. That will be true peace and rest – to simply stand in the light of God’s glorious presence.

Do you see the wisdom and wonder of God’s great plan of salvation and history? Isn’t it so much better that God wrote this elaborate story with Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham and Moses and David and Daniel and Peter and Paul and John and JESUS write in the middle of it?

Could God have made Adam and Eve and dropped them into this amazing new heaven and earth? Sure. He could have. And it would have been perfect. It would have been glorious. But it would not have had **that sense of COMPLETION**. There would have been no tension resolved; no problem overcome; no anticipation fulfilled...

- Would you like ***an arranged marriage*** – your parents set it all up for you? Or is there something about the waiting, the searching and the finding involved in marriage for you? The tension, the worry, the conflict. Yes, marriage is hard. But isn’t it also beautiful?

- Isn't there something about playing the game and being the underdog? Isn't there something about facing an enemy, fighting a battle and winning the war?
- Would you like to be handed **a finished project** that someone else worked on? Or would you rather start with a blank sheet of paper or something that's a big mess – so you can get in there and start fixing and creating? Isn't that most of the reward of WORK – the challenge, the tension, the confusion, the obstacles to overcome...?
- What good is a finished project if it cost you nothing to produce it? Can you enjoy someone else's work? Of course. But doesn't it mean more to you to sit on a deck you built or helped to build? Doesn't it feel especially gratifying to finish that kitchen or bathroom remodel and THEN to enjoy it?

That will be heaven – **the COMPLETION of all of our earthly work** – the culmination of our partnership with God himself in HIS WORK throughout all of history. Listen to these words from the Lord in verse 6:

2. The Completion of Heaven

“And he said to me, ***‘It is done!*** I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” Rev. 21:6

- **The Peace of relationship and rest**

The One who said ***“let there be light”*** to set history in motion is the one who will say, ***“It is done!”*** at the end. All of God's work from Adam to Abraham to Jesus to today has an END DATE. It has a COMPLETION stamp coming.

Think about it. If God had just created the world and then skipped all of history – including YOUR LIFE AND MINE – just fast-forwarded to heaven – would that be BETTER? It would be meaningless for God to say “It is done!” when nothing happened... He said, “Let there be light,” and then “that's it. We're done.” No story; no tension; no drama; no problems; no resolution.

What Revelation 21-22 shows us is ***the infinite wisdom of God in writing the story of history exactly as He did.*** And hear this: The God who is writing HISTORY is also writing **YOUR STORY**. He deliberately placed you in the story right here, right now. Even in this very room today.

Do we face challenges? ***Do we experience tension, fear and confusion?*** Very much so. Is that what makes any story great? Yes. But there is wonderful good news here for us. That tension we feel – that drama – that sense of need for rescue – is exactly what God programmed into us. That is precisely what this world is designed to create: **a deep and unshakable feeling that we were made for something better. Because WE WERE.**

This world is a mess. ***This is not what we were designed for*** and it is not what we will experience for eternity. In the light of FOREVER we will look back and see that “our light and

momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.” We will see how we groaned and creation is groaning in its bondage to decay but how we are more than conquerors in this dark and fallen world through Christ who gives us strength.

See, that is the good news – that **there is a HERO in this story**. His name is Jesus – and He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Jesus is the author of the story; and He is the hero of the story. He is the author of YOUR story and He is the PERFECTER or FINISHER of your story. He is the one who started the work in you and He is the One who has promised to bring that work to completion.

Joni described the moment she enters heaven, pushing her wheelchair up to Jesus. PUSHING - because she will be walking. She’ll roll that chair up to Jesus and thank him for all she learned from that chair about trusting in Him and growing closer to Him. But then she will ask Jesus if she can watch while she throws that wheelchair right into the pit of hell. That will be her completion; her resolution. The chair is part of her story now - but it will not be for eternity.

And the completion day is right here in front of us – it’s the day He comes back.

On that day the sun and moon will fall from the sky, the clouds will roll up like a scroll, all of heaven and earth will freeze as Jesus stands up and says, “IT IS DONE.” Enough. The story is over. Time is up. We have one more description of heaven – its perfection, completion and finally:

3. The Satisfaction of Heaven

“To the thirsty I will give from *the spring of the water of life* without payment... and I will be his God and he will be my son.” Rev. 21:6-7

- The Joy of experiencing God unfiltered

The new heaven and new earth, like the garden of Eden, will be filled with LIFE. Do you want to know where the fountain of youth is? Right there: in the eternal dwelling place of God. And it flows directly from His throne because **HE IS the fountain of all life**. He is the Creator of life and the Sustainer of life. He is the God of BEING itself. In fact, that is His name – Yahweh, the God who is – the Great I am. Turn to chapter 22:

3. The Satisfaction of Heaven

“Then the angel showed me the river of *the water of life*, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Rev. 22:1

- The Joy of experiencing God unfiltered

Oh, **we are thirsty** in this desert wasteland. We get little sips of water here and there. That’s why our communion cups are so small. It’s just an appetizer. Just a taste. We get little glimpses of God’s glory and love and goodness. But the feast is coming. The river of the water of life – the

glorious BEING OF GOD HIMSELF will be opened to us forever. And that will be the ultimate joy of heaven.

We think of heaven and almost immediately reduce it to the earth we know. We want to know if our favorite pets will be there; if they'll have things like Fortnite or football or fantasy-adventure novels; will there be marriage (and sex) and family in the same way? Those are valid questions but what they reveal is how little we know about GOD. Because fundamentally and centrally **heaven will be about experiencing God** – knowing Him – seeing Him – being WITH HIM directly. That will be the water of life to our thirsty souls. Verse 2 adds:

3. The Satisfaction of Heaven

“On either side of the river, ***the tree of life*** with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.” Rev. 22:2

- ***The Joy of experiencing God unfiltered***

After Adam and Eve sinned God banished them from Eden so they COULDN'T eat from the Tree of Life and live forever in their sinful state. ***Death was a mercy*** to them to release them from their fallen condition. But in heaven – when all sin is removed and we are glorified – we will eat from the tree of life and **our souls will be satisfied.**

Again, don't make this earthly. It's not about the sweetest mango or the most succulent pineapple. No doubt the food in heaven will be better than the nicest restaurant or cruise line on earth. ***But the point here is not about FOOD but about GOD.*** That will be our ultimate satisfaction – being with the One we were made for; being with our Creator, our Savior, our Lord.

And that is precisely how the Bible ends – with a personal invitation from the Lord Himself.

God's Invitation

“The Spirit and the Bride say ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” Rev. 22:17

These are some of the very last words of the whole Bible. The Holy Spirit says to all of us here today – “Come to my new heaven and earth.” The Bride of Christ – that's us – all believers; this is our message as we invite our friends and loved ones – “Come with us to the home you were made for! Come and drink of the water of life that flows from the throne of God!”

Everyone who hears this message is invited to join in the invitation – “Let the one who hears about Jesus become an evangelist for Jesus saying, ‘Come with me! Come be forgiven, be set free, be made new! Come and find the life your soul has been longing for. Come and BE WITH GOD. Come home!’”

This invitation is **open to anyone who is THIRSTY**. The only requirement to get into heaven is knowing that you don't deserve it. That's it. No other requirement. You can't be good enough. You can't earn a place there. No one can. There are only two ways into heaven: live a life of unblemished PERFECTION. Or call on Jesus to give you His perfection. If you are less than totally perfect; if you've made a single mistake or bad choice then you can't get in the first way. So the only way in is to come to Jesus.

And this is precisely why Jesus came to earth – *so we could come with Him to heaven*. He died on the cross so we could live forever. He bore our sin so we could be free from sin. He was buried in a tomb so we could eat from the tree of life and drink from the river of life. He was forsaken by the Father so we could enjoy unfiltered relationship with the Father.

So here is **the story of God** – the story of history – the summary of the Bible.

Once upon a time God spoke and created the world. He made a man and woman who pretty quickly screwed things up. But God had a plan for that and set it in motion right away. The world was broken and people were messed up, but God set His plan in motion to fix it all. **Act one was the story of Israel**, starting with an old man named Abraham. God showed the whole world what He was like as a promise-keeping, law-giving, kingdom-conquering Lord.

Act two was the big moment when Jesus – the Son of God – came to earth. In a shocking twist the Almighty Creator was born as a helpless human baby. The eternally divine Son of God lived a perfect life – he never sinned once. He taught about God and showed us the fullness of what God is like and what it means to obey Him and please Him. Then Jesus allowed the Jews and Romans to kill him so He could become the ultimate sacrifice to pay for sin.

Act three is still going right now. Followers of Jesus took this message of Jesus' sacrificial death and victorious resurrection and ran all over the world telling people there is a way to be forgiven, set free and made ready for heaven. And one more thing: Jesus is coming back soon to begin Act 4.

And you don't want to miss Act 4. That is the one that will last FOREVER. It's when everything gets unmade so it can be remade PERFECTLY. There in the new heaven and new earth Jesus makes will be PERFECTION. There will be the COMPLETION of everything God has been doing in history and in YOUR LIFE. There will be SATISFACTION. Everything your heart longs for you will experience forever and forever.

IF you belong to Jesus. If and only if you answer His invitation to COME. God will not force anyone to come to this party and be with Him. Sadly, it is totally possible to refuse this invitation. But for now the door stands open and Jesus Himself is calling out: "everyone who is thirsty – come and drink from the river of the water of life!"

Come! Come and drink!
Let's pray.