

We come to the last message in our series, One Kingdom. Indivisible. A few weeks ago, we talked about how God's Kingdom has a "now and not yet" aspect. The kingdom of God is "now" in that it's come near to us in the person and work of Jesus. We can choose "now" to repent and believe and live under his rule, but the day has "not yet" come when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God. That's what I want to focus on today — the "not yet" kingdom.

My purpose in focusing on the "not yet" isn't to blow off our responsibility to work for his kingdom to be manifest in the here and now. We're not glossing over the real problems of this world. In fact, it's our vision and hope of this future kingdom that will heighten our engagement with the world in the here and now. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "If you read history, you will find the Christians who did most for this present world were precisely those who thought most of the next."

So, I want to whet your appetite for what that future kingdom will be like. There's an old saying, "We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future." In many ways, that saying is true. There are many things about the future we don't know. We certainly didn't know what this year would hold when 2020 began. But despite all the things we don't know, we do know, whatever happens, God is in charge. Ultimately, the future is in his hands.

But there's a sense in which that statement isn't accurate. There's a sense in which we do know the future. In the book of Revelation, Jesus pulls back the curtain and allows us to see something of a future kingdom. The apostle John was told to write down what he saw so people like us could read about it. Some of the things are kind of scary, but in the end, the future that awaits the follower of Jesus Christ is awesome. The book of Hebrews says, "We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28). All the kingdoms of this world can be shaken, but not his kingdom. 1 Cor 2:9 says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Think of the most beautiful place you've ever seen? It's a slum compared to what awaits us. Think of the best party you've ever been to? It's a bore compared to what God has in store for his children. What's the most intimate moment you've ever experienced? A single moment in the kingdom of God will be more fulfilling.

The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about this future kingdom, but in Revelation 21-22, the curtain is pulled wide to give us a vision

of what awaits us. This was important because the apostle John was writing Revelation to encourage people struggling to live out their faith in a hostile environment. Some faced execution if they didn't declare "Caesar is Lord." Many must have wondered if it was worth it? "If staying faithful to Christ will cost me my job or my marriage or my house or even my life, is it worth it?" God says, "This is what I have in store for those who stay faithful to me. This is what makes it worth it." John describes something so wonderful he stretches the limits of language. He blends the literal and symbolic. It's like he's trying to describe to a fetus what life will be like outside the womb. All the tiny child knows is darkness and fluid. You have to use images he can understand. That's what John does. He gives us these three powerful images of God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is a new creation

The first image is of a new creation. "Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (Revelations 21:1). The biblical vision of the future isn't about the end of creation; it's about the beginning of creation, a new creation. God's story began with creation. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

Now the story draws to an end with another creation. This is the fulfillment of an old prophecy. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "See, I create new heavens and a new earth." (Is 65:17a). The biblical vision of the future has never been an escape from creation as we know it, but it's a remaking of creation as we know it. That's why in Rev. 21:5a states, "He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" That's present tense because the new creation has already begun. That's why Paul could write, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creations has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17). When we put our trust in Christ, it's like some of the future leaks into the present!

But it's not finished yet. Someday we're going to get new, glorified bodies to match what's happened in our heart. And the earth will also get a make-over. That means mountains and trees and animals and lakes and good food. Paul wrote, "that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). What will the "not yet" Kingdom of God be like? It will be a new creation.

The Kingdom of God is a new Jerusalem

The second image is introduced: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride

beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). Heaven is a new Jerusalem, a Holy City. Most of us don't think of cities as the ideal place to live. The first readers of Revelation lived in cities like Ephesus, Smyrna, and Laodicea. When we think of heaven, we don't think of a city. That's because all our cities are messed up. Cities were meant to be places of community and commerce. But these believers were being ostracized from all that because of their faith.

The power structures of their cities were under the spell of another city called Babylon, which embodied rebellion against God. But Babylon has fallen, and here in John's vision of the future, we see a new city that embodies everything you could possibly want in a city. You've heard of those studies that reveal the best cities to live in? Well, here's a city in a class by itself! Twice John says he sees this city *"coming down out of heaven from God"* (Rev. 21:2, 10). Those words humble us because it tells us the city of the future isn't our doing. It's not the result of some evolutionary progress or some genius of city planning. This city comes from God. It's made by God and given by God. The "not yet" Kingdom of God is a new Jerusalem, a holy city.

The Kingdom of God is a new Eden

Here's the third image. The not yet Kingdom of God is the new Eden. This comes out in the first few verses of chapter 22.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. Rev. 22:1-5

The first Eden was a beautiful, luscious garden where God placed Adam and Eve and told them to cultivate it. It had rivers flowing through it and a tree of life. Perhaps we should think of this new Eden as a beautiful urban park built within the city. In this new Eden, the crystal-clear river of life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb down the middle of the street. It flows with the life of God. And there's a tree of life.

Remember, in the first Eden, after Adam and Eve sinned, they were cast out of the garden, and the tree of life was blocked. But here all God's people have free access to it. And it's loaded with fruit. You've heard of the fruit of the month club. Well, this tree has twelve kinds of fruit, one for every month! Somehow, its leaves bring healing to all the nations of the earth. In the first garden, the ground was cursed, so it produced thorns and

thistles, but here the curse is gone. Darkness is gone. There's no more night because God himself gives light.

The "not yet" Kingdom of God is a new creation, a new Jerusalem, a new Eden. But what does that really mean? What does all this say about what we'll experience there? There's so much packed into these chapters, it would take us weeks to dissect it all. But let me give you seven things we know about our lives in the "not yet" kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is a real place

First of all, it's a real place. Some people think of heaven as a state of mind or a non-physical realm—not somewhere you go, but some esoteric, undefined existence. But John describes something material. There's a "creatureliness" to what he sees. "Stuff" is there. There are stones, gems, and streets. There are walls and gates. There are fruit trees and a river. Someone has said the Christian faith is the most materialistic of all faiths. In a way, that's true. The Christian vision of the future is very earthly.

George Ladd wrote that the Bible "always places man and woman on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence." God made us for the earth, and he'll fulfill that original intent by placing us on a new earth. Our destiny isn't to go to heaven. Our destiny is for heaven to come down to us. Our vision of the future isn't otherworldly; it's new worldly. And we'll not be freed from our bodies; we'll get new bodies, like the one Jesus had after he was raised up. Remember what his risen body was like? It was him, flesh and blood—scars. They touched him. They talked with him. They saw him eat. It was the same body, but it was new and different. Dallas Willard writes,

The life we now have as the persons we now are will continue, and continue in the universe in which we now exist. Our experience will be much clearer, richer, and deeper, of course...rooted in the broader and more fundamental reality of God's kingdom and will accordingly have a far greater scope and power.

The "you" that you are, will still be you.

The Kingdom of God is a sacred place

Second, the not yet Kingdom is a sacred place. The thing that dominates the description of this kingdom is the presence of God. John sees the holy city coming down, and he hears a loud voice.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Rev. 21:3

This is the fulfillment of all the covenant promises reiterated for centuries. Rev. 22:3 says, *"No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."* But in Rev. 21:22, the most remarkable statement

is made, *"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."* For a Jewish man like John, the temple is the place where God dwells. For him to say there's no temple is unthinkable. If there's no temple, where's God? But what John is really saying is the whole city is the temple. God's dwelling place is no longer a place in the city, but is the city itself!

That's what's being communicated in Rev. 21:16-17 when he gives the measurements of the city.

The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick.

John speaks of it as being laid out as a square cube. Do you know what else was a cube in the Bible? The Holy of Holies in the temple was a cube (1 Kings 6:20). That was the sacred place where God dwelt. Once a year the High Priest went in there on the day of atonement. But here, the city is the temple. So when you're in the city, you're in God. That's a mind-blower. Listen to what Gerhard Krodel, a New Testament commentator wrote,

The negative aspect of the city stated: There is 'no temple.' Stated positively, the whole city is engulfed in the glory of God radiating in it and from it. The saints no longer stand 'before' God, but live 'in' God, being completely surrounded by God, even as God lives 'in' them.

There is some mystery here. I'm not sure we can grasp all of this.

The Kingdom of God is a safe place

Third, the not yet Kingdom of God is a safe place. Each of us lives with a certain amount of fear. Anything can happen to us. The world is full of things that threaten. But John says when the new heavens and the new earth replace the old, *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Rev. 21:4). Why is that? Because there will be no more sin or crime, no litter or smog, no oil spills, no sickness or disease, no betrayal, or bickering. Think of all the folks that will need to find new jobs: exterminators, counselors, insurance adjustors, doctors, mechanics, policemen, health inspectors, maybe even pastors!

There's another image here that communicates safety. John says in the new heavens and new earth, *"there was no longer any sea"* (Rev. 21:1). That's kind of a bummer, don't you think? I love the sea. How can there be no sea in heaven? But in the Bible, the sea represents the forces of chaos. It's unpredictable. It can rise up and wipe out hundreds of thousands of people in a tsunami. Remember here in Revelation, it was the beast who came up out of the sea. When it says, *"there was no longer any sea,"* it's another way of saying in the new creation the forces of chaos are gone. No more typhoons and earthquakes. No more pandemics. No gun violence.

The Kingdom of God is a spectacular place

The kingdom of God is also a spectacular place. John describes the spectacular beauty of heaven as having walls of precious gemstones, streets of pure gold, and gates of pearls. What will make heaven most spectacular is the radiant glory of God that will replace even the sun's light. Reading through these chapters, you can't help but see there's a lot of glory there.

The Greek word for glory is *doxa*, and it means "heavy, weighty." It points to the weightiness of God's person. Glory radiates from his being. It's what makes him God. But Rev. 21:23 tells us with more specificity where this glory comes from. It says, *"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."* It's like John is dazzled by the glory that lights up the city, but he can't figure out where it all comes from. He looks high and low and finally sees a figure out of which all this light is pouring forth. He cries out with recognition, "It's the Lamb! The lamp is the Lamb!" The lamp giving off all this light is one you would least expect; it's the One who was slaughtered for our sins. It's the crucified Savior! There's no higher affirmation of the person and work of Jesus Christ to say he's the source of the glory of God.

The Kingdom of God is a spacious place

Not only is the not yet kingdom a spectacular place, it's a spacious place. Again, Rev. 21:16 says, *"He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long."* That's 1,400 square miles, the distance from Mexico to Canada, or from the Appalachians to California. And this space will accommodate all who come.

Jesus once said, *"My Father's house has many rooms..."* (John 14:2). We see this in Rev. 21:24-26. It says,

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

This is another way of saying all the different people groups of the world will be represented there.

The not yet kingdom of God is big enough for the full range of the world's ethnic and cultural diversity. The gates of a city were typically closed at night to keep foreigners out. But the gates of heaven will never be shut. There's no immigration problem there; no border patrol; no wall. It's like all peoples will be welcome and they'll bring with them all the beauty of their culture. Our cultural distinctions won't be obliterated in heaven. They won't divide us as they do now. They'll be celebrated and appreciated.

The Kingdom of God is a serving place

The not yet kingdom is also a serving place. I hope you didn't miss it. In Rev. 22:3b, it says, *"The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."* Then in verse 5b,

it says, *"And they will reign forever and ever."* This is hinting at the fact that heaven won't be like an eternal day off. We'll serve him. He'll give us assignments. We know in the first Eden there was work to do. Work was a part of paradise. God told Adam to care for the earth and to cultivate it. In the new Eden there will be work as well. It won't have the drudgery attached to it that our present work has. It will be joyful, creative, and productive work.

Dallas Willard writes,

We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join...in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. It is for this that we were each individually intended, as both kings and priests. Thus, our faithfulness over a 'few things' in the present phase of our life develops the kind of character that can be entrusted with 'many things.' We are, accordingly, permitted to 'enter into the joy of our Lord.' That joy is, of course, the creation and care of what is good, in all its dimensions. A place in God's creative order has been reserved for each one of us from before the beginnings of cosmic existence.

In other words, we're going to run the new world on God's behalf! Won't it be fun to find out what kind of assignment you'll have? And the thing is everyone will love their assignment! There won't be any whining, "Oh no, I have to do that?" No! It will be, "That's the perfect job for me."

The Kingdom of God is a satisfying place

One more thing about the not yet Kingdom: It's a satisfying place. We've seen the abundant provisions in Rev. 22:1-2—the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. Not only will heaven not have loss, it will not have lack. Every need will be met. Today, 800 million people will go to sleep hungry; one in six people in the world live in extreme poverty, under \$1 a day. These things will not be so in heaven. Heaven will be a place of life, fruit, and fullness; there'll be no lack, no longing, no have-nots.

But do you know what will bring the most satisfaction? It's found in Rev. 22:4. It says, *"They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."* Can that really be? The whole Bible, up to this point, has stressed that no one can see God's face and live (Ex 33:20). But here, in that very real place we call heaven, we'll see his face. The reason we'll be able to see his face is we ourselves will be changed. In one of his letters, John wrote, *"...when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).* So seeing him will change us into his likeness, and being changed

will allow us to continue to see him face to face. Nothing can satisfy more than that.

What excites you more, all the wonderful things about the not yet kingdom, or the One you'll get to see there? John Piper asks,

The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven if Christ was not there?

The not yet Kingdom of God is an amazing place

A new creation — something real

A holy city where God dwells, a place that's sacred, spacious, and spectacular

A satisfying new Eden where we'll serve him

Do you know what I believe? I believe God has placed within every human being a longing for exactly what I've described today. Ecclesiastes says God has *"...set eternity in the human heart..." (3:11).* It's like our heart is made for the kingdom of God. It only thrives in that one habitat. And the longings we experience now testify to that.

And if all of this is true, then we can understand the human need for hope. John Eldridge writes,

If we listen with kindness and compassion to our own souls, we will hear the echoes of a hope so precious we can barely put words to it; a wild hope we can barely bear to embrace. God put it there... The secret to your unhappiness and the answer to the agony of the earth are one and the same—we're longing for the kingdom of God... That is the only hope strong enough, brilliant enough, glorious enough to overcome the heartache of the world.

And I believe it's only as we live with that kind of hope that we can be armored against discouragement and despair. It's only with that kind of hope that we'll be more motivated to spend our lives for things that matter. I love how John put it in one of his letters, *"But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2b-3).*

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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