

## Revelation 21 The joyful God

### Introduction

It is impossible to know in any detail what lies beyond this life, although it hasn't stopped people imagining heaven in all kinds of details and publishing books containing their 'blessed thoughts' as if they were statements of verifiable truth! The Bible gives us some hints about the future and we can get a glimpse of the wonderful world that God had planned for humanity to enjoy in the first place –until Adam and Eve fell into sin. However, in God's new creation all will be perfect in a sin-free world. We live in a troubled and significantly broken world. Humanity is capable of the most extraordinary feats of endurance and discovery; of scientific advances and economic progress. Yet the race that can put a person on the moon cannot yet be bothered to provide clean drinking water and sanitation for significant minorities of people on this planet. Billions will be spent on making war and a minute fraction of that sum in efforts for peace. The rest of the creatures on the planet must seriously wonder what makes us 'tick' with the way we relate to one another and the rest of creation and indeed how we care or don't care for the environment around us.

At one level when so much of the news is so depressing it would be easy to give up and resign ourselves to doing nothing to make an impact on people or the community around us. What should stop a Christian from doing that is our recognition that we know in general terms how things are going to work out in the end. In various passages of the Bible, not least here in Revelation we can get some idea of the end of the story. We will never know how close we are in time to Jesus' return, as Mark 13:32-33 reminds us: *But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* <sup>33</sup> *Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.* But knowing the successful outcome of our work for Him and the triumph of His Church with Him at the end enables us to keep going in the difficult and discouraging times we face. Do you need to be encouraged about the future? We know and serve the joyful God who knows the future. Therefore, we can have confidence that the future is safe in His hands.

### 1. Back to the Future (Revelation 21:1-7)

(a) A new beginning (Revelation 21:1-2) *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. 'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* All of us, I am sure, have had those moments. We have heard words uttered with all sincerity in a public setting, but entirely inappropriate. What is worst of all is that sometimes they have been our own and that is both embarrassing and in the worse cases distressing. How we long on such occasions to recall those words and 'unsay' them, but the truth is that this is not possible. There are occasions when behavioural choices are made which with hindsight were foolish or at least unwise and the consequences that followed totally unwanted, but we cannot undo these choices in this life. Sometimes the mistakes we make can be rectified but on many occasions we have to live with the decisions we made. With the exception of Jesus, everyone else on the planet if they had a chance to rewind their lives and have a 'take 2' would make some different choices. Some people would definitely have chosen different subject choices at school or an alternative career. For a minority of people it is possible they might have chosen to prioritize other friendships or relationships? In this life we cannot rewind the clock and live again now that we have gained the necessary

experience to do better! We may at times long for a new beginning or to go back to the future, but the 'if onlys' are of no benefit to us.

However, God has chosen something even better for us. He anticipates our hopes and aspirations and says 'aim higher' *What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived* – *the things God has prepared for those who love Him* – <sup>10</sup> *these are the things God has revealed to us by His Spirit* (II Corinthians 2:9-10). Our goals and our aspirations can too easily be set on things that will so soon be gone, or are of little or no eternal value. Our priorities will inevitably change as our age changes. What is important and difficult to do in practice is to seek to recognise what really matters over the longer term. The kind of person I am matters infinitely more than what achievements I accomplish in my career or employment –albeit we do want to do our best in the workplace! Doing what we do to please the Lord is our priority as we will never please other people all the time. Other people, sometimes, will misjudge our motivation for decisions we take, or in the words we speak, but only the Lord truly sees what is in our hearts. Remember the words from I Samuel 16:7: *But the Lord said to Samuel... The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* One day in the future we will experience a world exactly as God had intended this world to be like, and we by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit will be able to experience and enjoy what God has prepared for us. How we look forward to that new beginning.

(b) **A new environment** (Revelation 21:3) <sup>3</sup>*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.* The place the Lord's presence rested in the Old Covenant era was the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could go once a year on the Day of Atonement, but when Jesus' perfect sacrifice of Himself for our sins was accepted by God the Father something remarkable happened. In Matthew 27:50-54 it states: *And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit.* <sup>51</sup> ***At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*** *The earth shook, the rocks split* <sup>52</sup> *and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.* <sup>53</sup> *They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.* <sup>54</sup> *When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely He was the Son of God!'* This huge 60ft by 30ft thick curtain took a lot of effort to put in place. No accident of human origin could explain the tearing of it from the top to the bottom at the very time when the afternoon prayer service had commenced that afternoon. No longer was access to God the Father exclusively via a human priest. Instead we can come directly to God in prayer with all our needs. Paul in Ephesians 2:18 reminds us: *For through Him [Jesus] we [Gentiles and Jews] both have access to the Father by one Spirit [the Holy Spirit].* However, this is what we have now, but this verse speaks of what we shall experience in God's new creation.

In the person of Jesus Christ the apostle John wrote these words: *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling [lit. 'pitched his tent'] among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). The author of Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 1:3 that: *The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.* Here is God dwelling with His people in the person of Jesus. This is confirmed by an exchange between Jesus and His disciple Philip at the Last Supper in John 14:8-9a: *Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'* <sup>9</sup> *Jesus answered: 'Don't you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.* We have a choice here either we accept Jesus' words at face value about His identity or we reject them as an impossibility. These words can never be a mere opinion by a nice Bible teacher or good person. Put these words on any of our lips today and we see the

sheer implausibility of such an utterance from us. Christians believe, I believe and I trust that you believe also that these words are true that in Jesus God was living in the midst of His people. But Jesus was with His disciples for a limited time before He went back to heaven.

Here Revelation 21:3 speaks about our permanent felt experience in God's new creation. The blessing of fellowship with the joyful God for all eternity could never be adequately expressed in human words. It hints at a level of fellowship enjoyed by Adam and Eve prior to the Fall into sin (Genesis 3), but it points to a world where the created order will be as God desires it to be. A world in which there will be unqualified delight in its beauty and blessings. In this life we have some special times when we sense God's nearness to us through the work of the Holy Spirit within us; then it will be closer to our 'normal' experience of His goodness to us. Do you look forward to such a day? I hope so, but first we need to put our faith and trust in Him and commit to following Him as His disciples.

(c) **A new experience** (Revelation 21:4)<sup>4</sup> *"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.* Benjamin Franklin, the American statesman said that in life only two things are certain death and taxes! There is no doubt that in the biblical genealogies from Genesis 5 onwards there is the repeated refrain: *and then he died* (Genesis 5:5, for example). No matter how many years we live on earth the day will come when we die. In this life the rich and powerful just as much as the poor and vulnerable will face death, pain and heartache. Life has its moments of great joy, but none of us will be spared the times of tears and the inevitable separation from loved ones who have left this life. These words from Revelation 21 are quite commonly used in funeral services and are naturally a pointer to life beyond the grave where such heartache and the sense of acute loss are not to be found. What a joy it will be to live in a world where these negative experiences are absent. These things like the present world order will have passed away. Our joyful God will be enjoying unbroken fellowship with His people as He desires and which He brought about through the perfect once-for-all-time sacrifice of Jesus.

In the Old Testament in Isaiah 35:10 the prophet offered this portrayal of the future hope. With respect to God's redeemed people, *everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.* In Revelation 7:15-17, John pictures the people of God in heaven in these terms: *'they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.'*<sup>16</sup> *"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them," nor any scorching heat.*<sup>17</sup> *For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; "he will lead them to springs of living water."* ***"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*** The same message comes across in Isaiah 25:8a: *He will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;* and from Paul in I Corinthians 15:54b: *Death has been swallowed up in victory.* I look forward to that day! Are you ready for that day? Have you placed your life in His hands through faith in Jesus Christ?

(d) **A certain future** (Revelation 21:5-7)<sup>5</sup> *He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'* Then He said, *'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'*<sup>6</sup> *He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.'*<sup>7</sup> *Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.* Politicians make promises in manifestos, but how often they are broken for a whole variety of reasons. God keeps His promises. As early as Isaiah 65:17-18a God had declared: *See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.*<sup>18</sup> *But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I will create...* What God has promised He will deliver. The question remains have you trusted Him with your future?

## 2. Planning for the celebration (Matthew 22:1-14)

This parable of Jesus is a story with a clear point that needs to be heeded. It is a divine perspective on human history that does not reflect well on the responses of human beings to their creator. It reminds us of our opportunity but also the folly of refusing to come to God on His terms and in His way. What does Jesus spell out plainly to us?

(a) **The rejected initiative** (Matthew 22:1-7) *Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: <sup>2</sup> ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. <sup>3</sup> He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. <sup>4</sup> Then he sent some more servants and said, “Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.” <sup>5</sup> But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. <sup>6</sup> The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.* The story is about God’s initiative in relating to His people through the imagery of a king and his subjects. It pictures a special celebration that was planned well ahead of time to which a general invitation has been given to his subjects, but despite the amazing invitation they were refusing to attend this event. In the story there are all kinds of different responses, but they were uniformly negative. One person declined on the basis of a need to ‘look at his field’. This is of the order of a politician resigning from high office ‘in order to spend more time with his or her family’! It sounds so reasonable on the surface, but when carefully considered is not a real reason only an excuse to get out of doing what he ought to have done. It is about priorities. There are people in every community who know about Jesus and the gospel but know that if they truly commit to following Jesus it will change their lives and they are not willing to adjust their schedule to give the place He deserves in their lives. There are people who may have made a profession of faith but fail to prioritise in their weekly schedule time for worship of God and time for serving Him. It is tragic to be so close to God’s kingdom, but to fail to follow Jesus? Has there been a time in your life when you have put your trust in Him? if not why not today?

Other said they were too busy with their business –notice legitimate things, in themselves perfectly reasonable activities, but given too high a place in priorities when time for God was left out. Christians too can be too busy with work or hobbies or something that squeezes out time for personal devotions or collective worship and service with fellow believers. It is easy in our culture to be repelled by the people of violence who kill other people because they are of different convictions, because too few people have convictions they would be prepared to die for. Those who commit murder and acts of evil in the parable received their just deserts. However, it was not only the overtly evil citizens who missed out on the celebrations, but also those who simply declined to take seriously the King’s invitation. Have you responded to the invitation from the King of Kings? Have you put your trust in Him through Jesus- if not please don’t delay the gift of salvation will not be offered for ever.

(b) **The repeated invitation** (Matthew 22:8-10)<sup>8</sup> *Then he said to his servants, “The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. <sup>9</sup> So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.” <sup>10</sup> So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.* The gospel is a wonderful message of God’s grace to the underserving. It is offered to all people without exception, but we need to pray concerning invitations given because it requires the Holy Spirit to open people’s eyes to see their need of Jesus. It requires the prompting of the Holy Spirit to enable us to commit our lives to following Him. Notice here the guests did not turn up on their own they were invited by the representatives of the King. People today are unlikely to show up to Life Explored or other courses or to Sunday services without an invitation from us. Of course there are invitations not accepted, or not at that time, but as

faithful stewards we will keep faithfully inviting people to hear more about Jesus or to respond to Him. The picture presented in the parable is that such efforts over time will be successful. It will require serious perseverance but it will be worth it in the end because the final triumph of Jesus the King of Kings ensures that there is much joy in heaven as each person who responds to Jesus repents of their sins and comes to Jesus. Have you come to Him? Have you started the Christian faith journey? The overwhelming majority of people who become Christians received an invitation or invitations to hear about Jesus in some form or other from another person. If you are a Christian here today take a moment or two to thank God for the influential people who played their part in you coming to trust the Lord Jesus. However, may we also make history in the coming months and years by being a person who is the means by which someone else hears about Jesus. The reward for such faithful service is out of this world!

(c) **The reasonable inquiry**<sup>11</sup> *‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup>He asked, “How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?” The man was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king told the attendants, “Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” <sup>14</sup>‘For many are invited, but few are chosen’ (Matthew 22:11-14). We live in an individualist culture in which people assert in Frank Sinatra’s memorable words: ‘I did it my way’. In many things that may be good. Taking ownership over your homework or projects at school or writing your own dissertation at university is highly commendable. We ought not to be copying someone else’s work. In our workplace we may have devised a better model of practice compared to others doing a similar job – once again well done! There is a right place for initiative and creativity and doing many things in life in our own way. However, that does not apply to matters of personal salvation and belief in God. God has offered us salvation through Jesus which this robe symbolises and which this guest decided to reject. This imagery of the robe of righteousness is found in both the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah 61:10a in some words of great joy in God, it states: *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of His righteousness...* The guests at this kind of function had to follow the rules set by the King for admission to the wedding, but this man was saying I have no respect for you and your guidelines for this function. I will do my own thing and wear my own clothes. There are many people who say the equivalent speech with respect to salvation in Christ. God I will save myself thank you, I don’t need to be saved through Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice in my place. I am good enough to earn my place in heaven on my own terms. This kind of shocking arrogance of a creature against the creator is profoundly sad; it can only have one outcome when we reject the overtures of a loving heavenly Father. Salvation is an unmerited free gift of God given on His terms. Our calling as Christians, says Paul, is this: *We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become [or ‘be clothed in’] the righteousness of God (II Corinthians 5:20-21).* May each one of us be humble enough both to accept our need of salvation and to put our faith wholly in the Lord Jesus Christ who gave His life for us, Amen.*