

Revelation 21:1-4

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[0 : 00] We've spent a few Sunday mornings tiptoeing behind John and looking over his shoulder to see and hear and try and understand the vision he was given on the island of Patmos some 2,000 years ago.

And it's been quite a ride. And for the last couple of Sundays, the vision has portrayed for us in vivid and frightening images the end game.

For those of you who have been able to be here the last couple of occasions, you're familiar with that. The enemies of God have been vanquished. Babylon has been destroyed.

The beast and the false prophet have been thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The army of Satan has been devoured. And Satan himself has been thrown into that same lake of burning sulfur.

The dead have been raised for judgment. The books have been opened. And all those whose names were not found in the book of life have been thrown into the lake of fire.

[1 : 15] All of this we have witnessed in the vision over the past couple of occasions. What remains? Well, what remains is God and his redeemed people.

God and all those whose names are written in the book of life. And what happens next? Well, John's vision moves on to portray what is both a stunning climax to the vision and a new beginning for God's people.

A new beginning where new is very much the operative word. It is the word that stands out and that can serve as our guide as we explore this remarkable climax to John's vision.

It begins as the curtain rises to the events described in the final two chapters of Revelation. And it is the climax.

For the final time we read the now familiar words that introduce chapter 21, Then I saw. These words have been repeated time and time again as John shares with us his vision.

[2 : 32] Now for the final time, he introduces what he is to share with us with these words. Then I saw. He has come to the climax of his vision.

And the pivotal place of the word new is established by God himself. God, for the first time since the beginning of the vision, speaks directly. God has been speaking.

He has been communicating. But through others, through the living creatures, through the angels. But now we hear him speaking directly in the vision as we reach this point of climax.

And he is the one who establishes this word new as central to all that he has to say. Notice what God says there in verse 5 of the chapter.

He who was seated on the throne. He who goes on to identify himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The name that he employed for himself at the very beginning of the vision.

[3 : 38] This is the one who in verse 5 declares, I am making everything new. I am making everything new. This is the project.

This is the agenda. This is the declaration of intent. This is what I am doing. I am making everything new. So this word new figures prominently in the very words of God as he explains what is going on.

I am making everything new. Now that statement, I am making everything new, is a very comprehensive statement. But let's break it down in parts as we explore the first four verses of chapter 21.

And identify four elements of the grace-filled, creative genius of the Almighty. And helpfully in each verse we can identify one element of this big project of making everything new.

In verse 1, we have a new creation. And we'll think a little bit about that. In verse 2, we have a new Jerusalem. And we'll explore a little bit what that means, what that picture is painting for us.

[4 : 52] If we jump to verse 4, we have a new order. For the old order of things had passed away. We have a new order. And then we'll backtrack to verse 3 and consider a new intimacy.

So these are the four aspects of God making everything new that we want to focus our attention on this morning. A new creation, a new Jerusalem, a new order, and a new intimacy.

Let's begin with a new creation. Maybe before I embark on these four aspects, just a necessary caveat.

We will not be able to answer every question that the passage presents to us. Even limiting ourselves to the verses that we're going to limit ourselves to.

But I hope that we will be able to give a broad sweep of the big truths that are revealed by the vision or this part of the vision.

[5 : 55] A new creation. The chapter begins, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. There is something quite exciting, perhaps also daunting, about finding and occupying a new home.

I think it's often described as one of the big events in somebody's life. Moving to a new home. And there is an excitement associated with moving to a new home.

What will it be like? Will it be big enough? Will it have a nice garden? Will it have the wow factor?

I'm sure you have better things to do with your time. But if occasionally you watch some daytime TV and these property programs, they escape to the country or whatever it is.

And, you know, people are showing all these new homes. And this is an expression that the presenters often use. Does it have the wow factor? I thought, well, this house has the wow factor.

This new home where people can look ahead and dream about how they will enjoy what remains of their life. Well, this new creation is all about a new home for God and His people.

[7 : 06] And be assured, it has the wow factor. And I want to tease out three aspects of this new creation. First of all, the need for it.

Then the anticipation of it. And then the nature of it. As very briefly described in that verse. First of all, the need for it.

And here we do need to look elsewhere. Our current home, the one in which we live, this creation is broken. In many ways, I don't feel the need to prove that point.

I think all of us recognize that that is so. We live in a broken world. But let's just listen to what Paul says in acknowledging that reality in really very vivid language.

In Romans chapter 8 and from verse 20 we read, And Paul goes on.

[8 : 20] And we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And he continues. Paul vividly personifies creation to help us capture its plight, cursed by the fall.

From the dawn of time and the fall of man, there has been a need for a new creation. A new heaven and a new earth. So we have the need for this new creation.

But we also have in the big story of the Bible, we might call the anticipation of it. You know, we've read Isaiah chapter 65 or part of that chapter.

And there are other similar passages in Isaiah and elsewhere. And in that passage, we were confronted with a prophetic expectation and anticipation of this new creation.

And it is beautiful to behold. This was an anticipation shared by Jesus. Listen to the language that He uses as it's recorded for us in Matthew's Gospel.

[9 : 30] In Matthew chapter 19 and in verse 28. In Matthew chapter 19 and in verse 28. Jesus said to them.

He's speaking to His disciples. And He says this. Truly I tell you. At the renewal of all things. When the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne.

And then He continues. And our concern isn't really what He goes on to say. But simply the manner in which He introduces the prospect of this future reality. And He describes it as at the renewal of all things.

New heaven. New earth. New creation. The need for it. The anticipation of it.

But also the nature of it. It's described in the vision as a new heaven and a new earth. Now the language of heaven and earth takes us back to Genesis in chapter 1.

[10 : 28] And the original creation of the cosmos. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. It's an expression that is intended to capture the sense of everything.

In the beginning God created everything. But now we are being told about a new heaven and a new earth. And the word translated new in the passage in Revelation is significant.

It suggests newness in kind and quality rather than in origin or time. This is not about a completely new creation with no continuity from the original creation.

This is not, if you wish, creation ex nihilo, out of nothing. But creation renewed. This creation where we currently live, our current home, God's creation restored and renewed by God.

This ties in with the words used by Jesus that we commented or quoted just a moment ago. The renewal of all things. That the renewal of all things.

[11 : 41] Let's never forget that what God created in the beginning was very good. We have that in the testimony of God's own words. He saw all that He had created and it was very good.

And though spoiled by sin, it remains very good. Our current home is broken but beautiful. God is not going to smash it up and start again.

But take that which is broken and powerfully renew and restore it. Now, we don't know exactly what that will look like or what that will involve.

But I think at heart it is important to acknowledge that core reality of what we are anticipating. The nature of this new creation.

Renewed. Restored. There will be in this new creation both continuity and discontinuity with the old creation.

[12 : 42] The new creation, the new earth, will be material, physical, recognizable. There will be elements of discontinuity in the verse. There's one that is rather intriguingly introduced.

John sees the vision and he says, And there was no longer any sea. What will that look like? The earth without oceans. I think the big idea is not so much the absence of physical oceans.

So, that may be true. But the sea is representing that which is threatening and unruly and hostile. Indeed, just in the previous chapter of Revelation, we met with the language of the abyss.

The sea is sometimes described in the Bible as the abyss. It's a symbol of that which is dangerous and hostile and unruly. And so, for that reason, in the vision, it is not present in this new heaven and new earth where there is no hostility.

There is no danger. There is no rebellion. There is no larger man. There is no more than come from. What are we told? I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. And I think the root, if you wish, of the city's journey is significant. While I recognize the need for caution and not drawing too much from pictures and images, but nonetheless I think the root that is described is worthy of comment. The origin of the journey is heaven. I saw the holy one, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. The origin is heaven. The root is down from heaven, and the destination implicitly is earth. What we have, I would tentatively suggest, is a coming together of heaven and earth, or if you prefer a picture of heaven on earth. And we'll have more to say on this in a moment. What is the new Jerusalem? How is it described? Well, it's described or it's pictured as both a city and a bride. Now this is not easy for us to visualize something that is at one in the same time, a city and a bride. But let's just think about both of the pictures employed. First of all, a bride prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. Now, only very recently in the vision we've met the bride. In chapter 19 and in verse 7, we meet the bride. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready, fine linen, bright and clean, beautifully prepared, beautifully dressed for the occasion, and perhaps more particularly for her husband. And who is the husband? Well, again, in that previous chapter, he has identified the Lamb of God, Messiah Jesus. In the chapter that we're looking at, in chapter 21 and in verse 9, again, he is very explicitly identified. One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls of the seven last plagues came and said to me, come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

[16 : 33] A bride. What comes down from heaven is a bride. But what comes down from heaven is also painted for us as a city.

Now, what is a city? Well, a city is a place to live. That's the key aspect of a city. We could describe a city in many ways, but if it is not that, then it's nothing. A city is a dwelling place. It's a place where people live.

What comes down from heaven is a dwelling place. We see the same two pictures in verses 9 and 10 of that same chapter. The invitation that the angel extends to John in the second half of verse 9. Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the holy city. He says, look, I'm going to show you the bride. And then he shows John a holy city. I think we can begin to see how the two pictures

harmonize. We have a home, the city, and we have a family, the bride, who will occupy this home. Well, let's make this personal to ourselves as believers. We are the city, the bride beautifully dressed, and the city is our home, our new home, the home that God will make for us. Now, this new Jerusalem, particularly in its character of a city, is very vividly described from verse 9. We read the whole chapter. We've read the description in the chapter, but we have to resist the pull of exploring that description for reasons of time this morning. A new creation, a new Jerusalem, but also a new order. In verse 4, we'll come back to verse 3. We're jumping verse 3, going to verse 4, and then we'll backtrack. Verse 4, speaking about God who dwells in the city, and it says of God, He will wipe every tear from their eyes. And then, especially what follows, there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Now, we don't have the word new, but it's implicit that if the old order of things has passed away, it has been replaced by a new order of things. We have a new creation, we have a new Jerusalem, and now we have reference to, or we have described, a new order of things. You know, conspiracy theorists love to rage on about a new world order and the controlling reach of its malevolent tentacles. Well, I'm not sure about a present new world order, but in John's vision, we witness the creation, the establishment of the new world or cosmic order. This is God's new order.

A new order of things is established, for the old order of things has passed away. And I want us to just notice three aspects of this new order. First of all, we'll look back and just identify the nature of the old order. Then the anticipation and partial realization of the new order. And then the new order in all its fullness, as it is described very minimally, but nonetheless described in this verse.

First of all, the nature of the old order. Well, this is the old order of a world blighted by sin, and in a measure governed by the prince of this world. We know that even today, ultimate government and sovereignty rests with the one seated on the throne, but there is a sense in which this world is governed by the prince of this world, by the evil one. That is the way it is in this old order.

[20 : 44] It is an order where evil flourishes and where death reigns. It is a world living under the shadow of the fall and its nefarious consequences. It's an order where good is called evil and where evil is called good. It's the order that pertains today. It's an order where children are abused and blind eyes are turned. It's an order where the rich gorge and the poor starve, and we could go on. The old order of things. But there is also in the big story of redemption the anticipation, but also the partial realization of the new order. In the passages that we read in Isaiah and the reference that we made to Jesus' words recorded in Matthew, we also find an anticipation of this new order. But the new order is not only anticipated, it is in a measure realized in the here and now as a consequence of the redeeming mission of Jesus. If we just consider one snapshot of how this new order begins to make its appearance, as it were, even in the here and now. Listen to what Paul says as he writes to the believers in Corinth, in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and in verse 17. Let's just notice the language that he employs.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 17. And he's speaking of us as believers and he says this, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, and that's something that is a reality in the here and now, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone. The new is here. There is a sense in which this new creation, this new order of things is present, is visible, is experienced, is realized in a measure in the here and now, in the very lives of those who have been born again of the Spirit of God.

We point to a greater reality that is yet to come. But it's real. It's something we experience now. But there is the new order in all its fullness. And the nature of the new order, certainly some aspects of it, are described in our text. What are we told about this new order? We're told this, there will be no more death. That's a big one. There will be no more death. This new order will be characterized by the absence of death. And the absence also, of course, of the cause of death. We know that the wages of sin is death. There will be no sin. There will be no death. There will be no mourning or crying or pain. All of these things will be absent in the new order that God will establish. Can you imagine that? No more death? No more mourning? No more crying? No more pain? Have you shed tears in these past days? Well, the day is coming when you will shed them no more, only tears of joy. Is pain your companion, or the companion of one you love? No longer in the new order? Can you imagine what this will be like?

Is it not a glorious prospect? Don't you long to take up residence in your new home? A new creation, a new Jerusalem, a new order, but also, finally, a new intimacy.

Let's backtrack to verse 3 and see what is said there. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, and as we follow the flow of the chapter, we discover that the one speaking is God. The alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. 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.

[25 : 14] This fourth aspect of God making everything new that I'm describing as a new intimacy. We don't find the word new in the verse, but the sense of newness is implicit in the manner in which the verse begins.

When we read there in verse 3, look, God's dwelling place is now among His people. In other versions, the now is at the very beginning of the sentence, giving it perhaps more prominence. Now, now the dwelling place of God is with man.

And clearly, the implication of that is that, in a sense, before, that was not the case in the manner that it is now. There is a new intimacy between man and God that previously was not experienced. Now, I'm not using the language of a new relationship, for the relationship already exists between God and His people. But the relationship is taken to a whole new level or depth of intimacy and friendship.

And here, we can also note three aspects of this new intimacy of relationship. An intimacy that is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise, and an intimacy that is signaled and secured by Jesus, and an intimacy that involves the revelation of God's glory and the enjoyment of His presence. Let's think of each of these in turn. The fulfillment of God's covenant promise.

[26 : 57] The language in verse 3 is covenantal language. It's at the very heart of covenantal language. I will be their God, and they will be my people. It's the language that God used when He spoke to Abraham. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

It's the language that we find in Jeremiah chapter 31, when we have anticipated the new covenant, the same language of covenant. On that day, I will be their God, and they will be my people.

And so here we have the fulfillment in the greatest measure of this covenant promise. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

But when we think about that, we say, but is that not already true? Of course, it is already true. God is already our people. We are already the people of God. He is our God.

But notice the additional words that we have in Revelation. The language is covenantal. It's drawn from the Old Testament, and yet there is a wonderful twist, we might say, in the manner in which God describes this new reality.

[28 : 05] Notice it there. Luke, 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.

God Himself will be with them and be their God. When you look at Genesis, when you look at Jeremiah, you don't have that same language of God will be with them. When I was looking at this, it came to my mind. I don't know if this will help to illustrate things or not.

You probably had better things to do with your time yesterday and not wasting it following the drama of Brexit. But in the debate in Parliament yesterday, one of the Labour speakers, in trying to convince all who were listening of how awful the deal that Boris had secured was, He says, take the two deals. Take Theresa May's deal, take Boris Johnson's deal, put them side by side, and notice the differences.

And he was highlighting that in the new deal, one or two things were missing that were in the first one. He said, put them side by side and notice the differences. I don't know if his argument was a good one or not, but the manner in which he presented it was a coherent one.

And that's what I'm encouraging you to do here. Think of the covenantal language of the Old Testament. I will be your God and you will be my people. And it's the same language here, but now you have this beautiful addition.

[29 : 25] I will be with them and be their people. Now, that's not to say that God isn't with us now. But it is to say that God will be with us in a way that is not our current reality and experience.

He will be with them and be their God. The fulfillment of God's covenant promise. But this new intimacy is also signaled and secured by Jesus.

It's signaled by the incarnation of Jesus. We think of the words that we find at the beginning of John's Gospel in chapter 1. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

It's the same language that we have here. God dwelling 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. The coming of Jesus was an expression of God dwelling with us.

It was an occasion where God in a most wonderful way dwelt with us. But it also signaled ahead to a day when that would be a permanent reality for us.

[30 : 31] Signaled by Jesus, but also secured by Jesus, by His atoning death. The wall of separation has been removed. The new heaven and the new earth becomes a possibility.

Nothing to separate us from God. We can live together with Him. Our first father was cast out of the garden. He couldn't live in the same garden as God.

He was thrown out. But thanks to what Jesus has done, we can have a re-encounter. We can live together again. When we speak about this new intimacy, we're speaking about the revelation of God's glory and the enjoyment of His presence.

Here I'm focusing on the significance of the word dwelling. Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people. He will dwell with them. And the word echoes the language of the Old Testament to describe the presence of God with His people in the temple and the holy of holies. And the word speaks both of God's glory and of God's presence. Or if you prefer, of God's glorious presence. For the two things are not separate. In our new home, we will see the glory of God in a measure that is beyond anything we experience in our current home.

[31 : 46] Our capacity to see the glory of God will be so much greater than it is today. In our new home, we will enjoy the near presence of God in a measure that is beyond anything we experience in our current home.

In our new home, God will live with us. We will share this new home with God. I'm reminded of the beautiful name that Ezekiel gives to the city as he looks forward to this new city or home.

The very end of Ezekiel in chapter 48. And he describes this city. And at the very end, he says, And the name of the city will be the Lord is there.

And this really is the heart of heaven. The centerpiece of the new heaven and the new earth. The Lord is there. And we will behold His glory.

Full of grace and truth. The nearness of God in this verse is then beautifully illustrated by the picture of God wiping away every tear from our eyes.

[32 : 49] And we're moving into the first sentence of verse 4. An implication of the nearness of God. God wipes away every tear from our eyes. All the tears of past hurt and pain and shame and suffering wiped away by the hand of God.

People sometimes speculate as to what might be the specific cause of the tears we shed as we take up residence in our new home. I think it's perhaps best to see this beautiful picture as describing how God tenderly prepares us for our new home.

He wipes away all that has no place in our new home. This is an act of deep healing and restoration. Restored people for a restored creation.

And as we've explored very fleetingly these four aspects of God making everything new, the cumulative effect is, I think, to help crystallize what has been described by the whole.

There is this merging of heaven and earth. The new heaven and the new earth are one integrated whole. The holy city has come down from God, who in the old order dwelt in heaven separate from us, though present with us by His Spirit.

[34 : 03] Now He dwells with us. We can put it this way. There is no longer any need for heaven and earth as separate dwelling places. The two are now one dwelling place for God and His people.

The holy city, then, is not to be understood as occupying or located on earth. Rather it is, let me cautiously suggest, the new heaven and the new earth.

They are one and the same, two descriptions of one reality. Or let me tease this out one other way. Once the enemies of God have been vanquished, what remains?

That's the question with which we began. What remains? Well, what remains is God and His people. If all that remains, God and His people, dwell in this new home, as we're told very clearly in these verses, what else is there?

There is nothing else. Once the enemies of God have been vanquished, what remains is the renewed cosmos, a merging of heaven and earth, of the invisible and the visible, two distinct but overlapping realities merging into one.

[35 : 11] This is paradise restored, but it is so much more than paradise restored. Well, maybe we should be careful not to drift unduly into the realm of speculation.

The big truth and the wonderful truth is that in our new home, God dwells. In our new home, Jesus reigns. In our new home, we will, in the words of our catechism, fulfill our chief end as we enjoy God forever.

A new creation, a new Jerusalem, a new order, a new intimacy. Will you be there? Will this be your new home? In the midst of all that is new in the vision, there is an old or familiar invitation that is extended to the thirsty.

In verse 6 we read, He said to me, God is speaking, 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. Now, in fairness, this verse that I've just read is not expressed in the form of an invitation, but rather it is a promise of eternal life and satisfaction for all who dwell in the new heaven and new earth.

[36 : 31] But the matter is expressed in terms of an invitation in the following chapter. In chapter 22 and verse 17, right at the very close of Revelation, what do we read?

The Spirit and the bride say, Come. It's an invitation. Come and let the one who hears say, Come. Let the one who is thirsty come.

Let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. God's concern in giving this vision to John and through John to us, God's concern is not only to give His people, to give us a peek into the new creation, to be encouraged by it, to be excited by it.

That is true. His great concern is that we be there, that you be there. Hence, the invitation is extended. And of one thing you can be sure.

Maybe there's things that I've said that you're not so sure about, and that's fine. But of one thing you can be sure. If you take the free gift of the water of life, then your name will be in the book of life.

[37 : 40] And you will, when the time comes, dwell in the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem. But if you do not drink of the water of life, your name will not be in the book of life, and you will not dwell in the new Jerusalem.

Rather, your fate will be other, as described and spoken of in the chapter that we have read, and we thought about it a little bit more last Sunday morning. How can you do that?

How can you accept this invitation? Where do you need to go to drink of the water of life? Well, listen to Jesus. Listen to what Jesus says to you this morning.

I'm reading from John chapter 14 and verse 4. Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Jesus is using this picture of drinking water. He's saying, I am the water. I am the one who satisfies. I am the one to whom you must turn. As you put your trust in me and as you follow me, you will be satisfied.

[38 : 47] You will be able to look forward to living in this new home of eternal satisfaction that God will create for His people.

And so I would urge you and encourage you, come to Jesus. Put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and follow Him as your Lord.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are indeed the God who makes all things new. We look forward to that day when You will make all things new.

The scale of it, the scope of it, the nature of it is perhaps in many ways still so hidden to us. We struggle to get our heads round all that it involves.

We thank You for the measure in which we can learn about these things as we read in the Bible what You tell us about them. But we also recognize that on that day there will be no doubt many surprises, but they'll all be wonderful surprises as we discover more and more of the new home that You will create for us, that You might live with us and be with us.

[40 : 03] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.