

Revelation 21-22 I believe in the life everlasting

Introduction

What happens when we die? There are various testimonies in the Bible in the different books. In Psalm 73:13-14, Asaph testified: *Yet I am always with You; You hold me by my right hand. ²⁴You guide me with Your counsel, and afterwards **You will take me into glory.*** In the New Testament, in the Lord's prayer, Jesus prayed a prayer for His present and future disciples. He prayed in John 17:24: *Father, I want those You have given Me **to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory,** the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world.* I believe that Jesus' prayer and wishes will be answered and His desire will come to pass. In II Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul wrote: *For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* In other words, when we leave this life, like passing through a door, we enter eternity to be with Him. Supremely, we recall Jesus' familiar reassuring words in John 14:2-3: *...I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you **to be with Me** that you also may be where I am.* The life everlasting is a life in the presence of Jesus.

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 human 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. ³³Be 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. ²I 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* – ¹⁰ *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) ³ *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.* ⁵¹ ***At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*** *The earth shook, the rocks split* ⁵² *and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.* ⁵³ *They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.* ⁵⁴ *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 extraordinary 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.'* ⁹ *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)⁴ *"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.'* ¹⁶ *"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them," nor any scorching heat.* ¹⁷ *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) ⁵ *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.’* ⁶ *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.’* ⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *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. **An active present** (Revelation 7:9-17)

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ *And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’* ¹¹ *All the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God,* ¹² *saying: ‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’* ¹³ *Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?’* ¹⁴ *I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’* ¹⁵ *Therefore, ‘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.’* ¹⁶ *“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,” nor any scorching heat.* ¹⁷ *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.”*

So what happens between the time I leave this life and when Jesus returns? Is there a heavenly waiting room where we all sit patiently waiting for God the Father to call time on this world and invite Jesus to return as King of Kings on earth? Absolutely not! There is so much we do not know about life in the intermediate state but there are a few glimpses in the Bible or pointers about it.

(a) **A time of restfulness** Revelation 14:13: *Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write this: blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will **rest from their labour**, for their deeds will follow them.’* Time is part of the creation, this world, so our perception of time will be different in eternity.

(b) **A time in Christ’s presence** Revelation 22:4: *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him.* ⁴ *They will see His face.* (i) **We will see Him** There are two things here hinted at in this verse. We will not see the Father and the Holy Spirit because they are invisible, but on the throne we will see the resurrected Lord Jesus on the throne in heaven surrounded by the heavenly beings. We will see Him (ii) **We will serve Him** There will be tasks we will take pleasure in performing for Him. Who knows what that is, but there are things that we can do at that time that will be honouring to Him. *His servants will serve Him.* That is tasks we will never tire of doing for as long as we can do them for Him.

(c) **A rejoicing in Christ’s presence** Revelation 7:10 *And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. They are singing His praises and hearing others utter His praises. In Matthew 25:23: Come and share your master’s happiness!’* Or in the more familiar language of the King James: *enter into the joy of Your Lord.* It is a time to look forward to! In its fullness, with our new resurrection bodies, what we will experience will be even greater.

3. **A wonderful future** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1)*

Isaiah 65:17-19 states: *'See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. **The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.***¹⁸ *But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.*¹⁹ *I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; **the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.*** God will give to us the great privilege of living in His new creation in that sin free perfect environment that our human ancestors messed up for us and this generation, sadly, too often is doing the same for future ones. That will not be possible in God's perfect eternal kingdom. In Christ not only humanity, but the created order itself will be regenerated and restored. (Romans 8:18-23). *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*¹⁹ *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope*²¹ *that **the creation itself will be liberated** from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*²³ *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, **the redemption of our bodies.*** No immortality of the soul taught in the Scriptures. It is the bodily resurrection of God's people who will delight in what God has prepared for them. The details given in Revelation 21-22 are impressions of the splendour of the glorious inheritance God has prepared for those who love Him. It will be more beautiful than we can ever imagine and more fulfilling than anything we have experienced so far on earth and in a context where sin and evil cannot be found. Hallelujah for that!

4. **Come Lord Jesus** (Rev.22:20) *I am coming soon*

In the light of such blessings and glory, Jesus declares in Revelation 22:12-13: *Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.*¹³ *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.* What is our response? John pictures the response to Jesus' words from the Holy Spirit and from His bride, the Christian Church: *The Spirit and the bride say, Come! And let him who hears say, Come! Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life* (Rev.22:17). This verse ends with a challenge. Have you received this gift of salvation? Has there been a time when you prayed a prayer of commitment to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour? I trust that each one of us either has already done so or will do so today, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

Q1. Have you received the gift of salvation so that this life everlasting can be for you too?

Q2. What are you most looking forward to when you go to be with Jesus?

Song for Reflection: 'The sands of time are sinking'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrFXXaBE1E0>