

## Introduction

Do you remember all of the dire predictions about what would happen on Dec 31, 1999? About everything from aliens to the computer failures, from the return of Christ to social meltdown? Well none of them have eventuated. It seems so long ago only a few years on. Predictions about the future have always been difficult:

Wilbur Wright said: "In 1901 I said to my brother Orville that man would not fly for 50 years – ever since I have distrusted myself and avoided all predictions" (they flew in 1903)

However others still keep making predictions: Arthur Summerfield, US Post Master in 1959 said: "Before man reaches the moon, your mail will be delivered within hours from New York to Australia ... by guided missile. We stand on the threshold of rocket mail." Well let's give him some credit. The trend that he thought of was correct – speedier communications. It was only the means that were off. He couldn't have conceived of the internet and email.

Here's another one: Arthur C. Clark, famous science-fiction writer said in Vogue magazine back in 1966: "By the year 2000 houses will be able to fly ... the time may come when whole communities may migrate for the winter or move to new lands whenever they feel the need for a change of scenery.

Well, I could go on, but you get the point. Few predictions about the future seem to get it right. And we have two trends in society that seem to contradict each other. We have the technological advancement pressing on – progress, progress is the catch-cry – the future is bright. And we have the sociological collapse pressing in – more toys and gadgets – yet more broken relationships, more self-destruction, more violence and crime and social disintegration – the future is bleak, not bright.

And that I suppose is why so many people in our society have lost any hope for the future. And you can ask people: "are you hopeful for the future?" – and they will say "No" because they're honest. Because without God there is no hope for the future. If this world is all there is then the future is grim indeed.

Some of that pessimism about the future is expressed for example, in George Orwell's 1984: O'Brien says to Winston - "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever ... And remember that it is for ever."

Imagine the despair of living today with that kind of certainty about the future? To escape that despair, some people, of course, turn to religion.

As one school girl put it:

"If you believe in reincarnation, you are reincarnated;  
if you believe in resurrection you are resurrected;  
and if you believe in extinction then you become extinct."

A fine statement of post-modern theory about the future – you create your own reality. I suppose the new age movement offers some kind of personal future at least – an intensification of personal identity, a kind of sense of unity with the cosmos. The sad thing is that when there is a great gap in confidence about the future – many Christians around the world have lost their confidence in the return of Jesus Christ and the reality of the new heaven and the new earth.

That is why it's so important for us to read these chapters – Revelation 21 and 22. And to study them very carefully. Because they strike us as being unrealistic, unobtainable, removed from reality – that's

what they read like. And that shows us how much our minds are formed by the materialist and secular culture in which we live – that we think that the only reality is the reality which is before us. We find it so hard to believe in anything beyond this world, in fact we are even suspicious of those who talk of a world beyond, suspecting that they are not facing the reality of this world. The opposite is the case.

It's only those who have a firm grasp of Revelation 21 and 22 who will know how to live in this world. It's only those who are certain of God and of his future of the new heaven and the new earth who can live honestly and freely in this heaven and this earth.

### 1. (21:1-8)

Well Revelation 21:1 starts with a promise.

“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.” (21:1)

Please grasp in your mind this picture that John is given in this vision of a radical transformation of this world. You might read vs. 1 and think: “Well, what John sees is a completely new heaven and a new earth – for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away – that is, it's a complete replacement of this world – but that, I think, is not true.

I think in John's vision there is somewhat of a parallel to Paul's idea of our resurrection bodies.

Remember what Paul says about our bodies in 1 Cor 15 he says that they are sown – that is that

- they die perishable but they are raised imperishable;
- they are sown in dishonour, raised in glory;
- sown in weakness, raised in power;
- die as a natural body raised as a spiritual body.

Paul sees a real connection between our body now and our body which we will be ours at the resurrection. Like the body of Jesus – the body Jesus had on earth is the same body, albeit a transformed body, that Jesus lives in now in heaven. And you can see that John's vision is of a continuity between this world and the next from vs 24 and 26.

“The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it ... The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.” (21:24, 26)

So please listen very carefully – the vision is this: what God will do, will be to recreate this heaven and this sky, this universe which we know. What God will do is take this world which he has made and reform it by his almighty power so that it will be, as it were, a new heaven and a new earth – continuous with the present earth, but radically changed by the power of God. And notice too, that John's vision is not just about personal immortality, our hope that “I will live for ever in some way” – no it is a new heaven and a new earth, and of a holy city, the new Jerusalem.

Now the great theme of chapters 21 and 22 is found in verse 2-8 that God lives with his people. And if you're trying to make sense of these chapters can I point out that 21:1-8 set out the main theme and 21:9-22:5 is the development of that theme. So all the ideas in 21:1-8 are reworked and re-explained, if you like, in 21:9-22:5

Well, what is the vision?

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." (21:2)

The slum of Babylon has been cleared – and the new society, the new human community comes down from where? – From God. Please notice it's not formed by human achievement, is it? It comes down out of heaven from God. God has so radically reformed human society that, if you like, it comes down out of heaven.

Now if you know your Bibles, you'll know that the people of God are often described as the Bride of God in the Old Testament. And those of you who are husbands, or would like to be husbands, will know these words from Ephesians 5:

"Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."  
(Ephesians 5:25-27)

So John's vision is of the restored, renewed people of God – formed by the death of Christ – coming down out of heaven prepared by God to live in this new heaven and this new earth. And this bride – that is ourselves – beautifully dressed for our husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's true here that God is saying that this bride is prepared by God – it's also true that back in 19:8 the bride has made herself ready with fine linen – which stands for the righteous acts / deeds of the saints.

So in the same way that God prepares his new people, so also God leaves it to us to prepare ourselves to be the people of God in the future. How? By the good deeds that we do in this world – by the righteous acts – that is, the good things that we do as members of human society now will be used by God to adorn us in the future.

It's very striking to think of all those lovely dresses which Princess Diana had – which have now been sold off – and in 100 years they'll be moth-eaten, won't they? And you think of the clothes that Mother Teresa had – who'll be the beautiful one in heaven? Mother Teresa will, won't she? Because of all the righteous deeds she did on earth, given her by God.

But the point of the vision is not the beauty of the bride v 2, though that is true, the point of it is in v 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." (21:3)

The great thing about this new society, this holy city, this new Jerusalem, this people of God transformed, this universe transformed – is that God will live among us. And we'll have that intimacy and closeness with God which eludes us while we're on earth and God is in heaven. Now it's hard for us to read v 4 without tears coming to our eyes, ironically:

"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." (21:4)

This is a much bigger vision than saying: "Well, God will make you happy at the end." – isn't it? What it's saying is all causes of sickness and sin and death will be gone. The world will be so radically transformed by the power of God that there will be no sorrow any more. The old order has passed

away ... and then you hear the first words from God in this whole book, the first direct words from God v 5: "I am making everything new!"

You know, I think that most people in the world today don't think God can make everything new. They don't believe that God can change them as individuals; they don't believe that God can change the world, the universe and human society. Yet that is exactly the hope which is put before us. That's the certainty that's put before us in these chapters of the book of Revelation.

"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." (21:6)

Then notice the contrast between verse 7 and 8

"Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death." (21:7-8)

The contrast, you see, is between those who overcome and those who are cowardly. What does it mean by "to overcome"?

- It means to persist with this vision;
- it means to hang on to this reality promised us by God;
- it means to believe that these are true words of God addressed to us;
- it means to trust all this will be accomplished at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be cowardly is to lose your nerve about God who can make all things new. To be cowardly is to say: "It'll never happen" – like so many people in our world say.

All those promises in the first few chapters to those who overcome – do you remember them?

- To the one who **overcomes**, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)
- The one who **overcomes** will not be hurt at all by the second death. (2:11)
- To the one who **overcomes**, I will give some of the hidden manna. (2:17)
- To the one who **overcomes** and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. (2:26)
- The one who **overcomes** ... I will acknowledge before my Father and his angels. (3:5)
- The one who **overcomes** I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. (3:12)
- To the one who **overcomes**, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne. (3:21)

To overcome is to endure and to persist as a Christian. And to those who persist this heaven, this new heaven, this new earth, this transformed universe is a certainty.

## 2. (21:9-22:5)

Then the next few verses – the vision is expanded and explained.

"One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "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, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." (21:9-10)

Now please notice he says: "I'll show you the bride, that is, the people of God, the wife of the Lamb" – and he goes up a great mountain and sees a great city. So the city is not the place where the people of God live – the city is the people of God. You notice that? He says "I'll show you the bride" and he shows him a city. So the city is not the place where the people live – no, the city is a statement of what the people are like, what are the people of God like when they're remade by God. Why, they're glorious, full of the glory of God, aren't they?

"It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal." (21:11)

You see the deep desire for beauty is put in us by God, isn't it? The tragedy is that we satisfy ourselves with such ephemeral beauty in this world. We think "O if I get a diamond I'll be really lovely".

This people of God we discover is made up of the twelve tribes – that is, the Old Testament people of God – and the twelve apostles, that is, the New Testament people of God.

This people of God is a cube – we find that in the measurements of verse 16 and 17. That is, we resemble the holy of holies in the Old Testament – the place where God is present.

The people of God are complete, not one is missing because of God's great work and the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

V 22-27 God lives with his people.

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." (21:22)

What we find so difficult about this chapter is that it's so perfect – isn't it? It's hard to think that it's actually real. Because you know what we think, we think that things are only real if they're imperfect. You find that when people say "I really like it when he made a mistake because then I knew he was a real person." Our view of reality is so limited that we think it must be imperfect. That's why these chapters are so hard to read and understand – because what they describe is perfection. And we poor, imperfect people find that hard to imagine let alone grasp.

"The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it." (21:24)

That is everything good from this world will be transformed into the next world

"The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." (21:26-27)

In chapter 22 we have the theme of the healing of the nations

"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." (22:1-3)

If you've read through Revelation that's extraordinary, isn't it? Because every second chapter you find the kings of the earth and their nations being joined together to fight against God! And now they're

subdued; and now they bring their glory to God; and now all nations are healed – cured by the leaves of the tree of Life.

One reason I love reading the book of Revelation is because of its marvellous multiculturalism, or multi-ethnicity I guess we'd say. People from every nation and tribe and language are gathered around the throne and praising God. So that's why I like New Zealand being a multi-cultural society. Not just because of the food – though that is enjoyable – but because all the ethnic and cultural diversity we see on earth will be radically transformed, changed, purified and brought into the presence of God.

You see, Revelation says we can't absolutise any culture – especially our own. We can't say: "My culture is right" – because every culture is judged by the book of Revelation, isn't it? And we can't say "that culture is damned" because people from every culture will be there, saved by Jesus Christ – gathered around the Lord Jesus and his heavenly Father.

And then the climax of this vision given to John:

"They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 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." (22:4-5)

Now let me ask you a question:

I've got here three boxes, you can choose one of them.

- This box here would make you the wealthiest person in the universe. Just think about that for a moment. Think how much good you could do for other people, and for yourself, with this box here. Think about it.
- The second box would make you the happiest person in the universe. Just think about that. Everyone else is walking around gloomy on a Monday morning – you're happy. They've problems – you're happy.
- And the third box is a promise that you will see God face to face. How many of you find the third box a bit of an anti-climax, really?

It's hard to avoid thinking about the other boxes. You're thinking: Couldn't I have all three boxes? Couldn't I have all the money, all the happiness and see God as well? I can't stop my eyes going to that box there – all the money or the box with all the happiness. But you see that's because we keep on thinking about this world – we're limited aren't we? We're bound to this world.

And the great promise, the great gift – is that we'll see God face to face. And that is no idle privilege, is it? Because we learn in the Bible that no one can see God and live. It's only those who've been saved by the blood of Christ, those who've drunk of the eternal spring of life - who can stand finally before God.

### 3. (22:6-11)

Now you think these words are hard to believe, hard to take onboard – I bet the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> C found them hard as well. And that's why the book ends with these three great statements.

The first one in 22:6-11 is that God's words are true.

“The angel said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.’” (22:6)

The second great statement is Jesus is coming soon – v 7

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who keep the words of the prophecy in this scroll.” (22:7)

And the third is the response of prayer: “Come Lord Jesus” (22:20)

Do you see than how chapter 22 brings all the themes of the book together? God’s words are true – that is, all that has been said, revealed, shown to John, and through John to us – is true. Then the promise of Jesus “I am coming”. That is, “I will make all this happen”, you see? Because the return of Jesus Christ will show the fulfilment of all of these prophecies. And then the prayer in response: “Come, Lord Jesus”

Like the last three verses of the book – keep these words: v 20 “I’m coming soon”; the response: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

## Conclusion

You know this book was written to ordinary Christians in Asia Minor who had little political power, some economic prosperity and little religious freedom. What God was showing them to do was to stand for God in their land and not to be seduced by the political and economic idolatries of Rome, the Roman Empire.

- God wanted them to stand by witness of word and action and not to be seduced by the prevailing ideologies. To work for the conversion of the nation, despite the weakness and the vulnerability of the people around them.
- God want them to relate to the present and think about the future in which God’s rule, through Christ’s reign would be achieved. His perfect purpose, a new heaven and a new earth - a renewed heaven and a renewed earth, making new everything that is old and worn out.
- God wanted people who would stand for the truth of God, over and against those political and religious lies, over against the deceit of Satan and those world powers.
- God wanted people who would do righteous deeds, good works done in God’s world, for God’s glory, in the name of the Lord Jesus.
- God wanted people who would overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb – the Lord Jesus, by the death of the Lord Jesus – and by the word of their witness.
- God wanted people who would now praise the Lamb and sing “Worthy is the Lamb

John says what the purpose of this whole vision is – to show “the things what must soon take place”. Not to make a doubtful prediction, but to inform us about what will soon take place. And we need to know this. We need to know the truth about the future in order to be encouraged, in order to have hope, to be strengthened - in order to be given joy for the journey. If you remove this book of Revelation, if you remove the note of hope from the Christian faith this life will become like driving a speeding car on a dark night without headlights.

As Christians we're actually told where we're going and the certainty and confidence in that is to give us a light-handedness with the things of this world, and a carefulness with the things of God that brings joy to us and others as we treat this world finally as it's meant to be treated – not as our creator but as a part of creation ultimately under the judgement of God.

Some people are fearful of hopes – they fear that like bad predictions hopes are uncertain, feeling that the only hopes we humans can know is what we wish would be the case. But the book of Revelation says: “no, no”. Against such scepticism John says we can know the future, and indeed we need to, in fact it's been revealed for us because we need to know it

“These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.” (22:6)

Friends, this is not simply a fond wish. The great victory over death has already begun in Jesus' resurrection. If you're here this morning as a non-Christian and this just sounds like a bunch of strange stuff to you, let me suggest that you look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We as Christians actually believe that the resurrection of the dead has begun with Jesus Christ.

According to the New Testament we are living in the last days and have been so for nearly 2000 years since Jesus' death and resurrection. The only genuine hope we can have about the future must come from God – and that's exactly where this vision of the future comes from – from God.

The only things to commend the truth of this vision to us this morning, if we're in any doubt,

- are the evident sincerity of John and the audience that he wrote to, as they suffered for this faith;
- the life of the amazing Lamb that was slain and yet who is alive;
- and the people sitting on every side of you this morning, who claim to know that one and to love him and to serve him.

These are the witnesses that we have of this coming city, where all God's people will live in his presence.

Can you hear these words? “I am making everything new”?

I want you to imagine that you're walking around tomorrow and you see a car accident – and you're first on the scene. And you see that there's a family in the car and the parents have been killed. And there's a girl of 6 in the back seat who's still alive. And you're waiting for the ambulance to come and you put your arms around her (you don't move her of course) – there she is. What will you say to her?

If you're Christian and you believe these words of Revelation 21 and 22 – you can say these words: “Everything will be alright; everything will be alright”. You're not just saying that because you want it to be true or because you want to bring some comfort to her last moments: you can say that because you believe it is true.

Everything will be alright because God is a God who makes everything new according to his plan.