

# BETWEEN THE ADVENTS

SERIES: WITH



Catalog No. 20181216

Revelation 21:1-5

Final Message

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December 16, 2018

*Revelation 21:1-5*

I had a “California moment” this past week. A California moment is when you’re outside in December and it’s 60 degrees. The sun is shining, you don’t need a jacket, you aren’t chilled, and you just can’t help but think “I LOVE this weather.” If you are from California, then you just call these moments “life.” But I have spent most of my life living in the Midwest, so I call them “California moments.”

As much as I love 60 degrees and sunny in December, there is something about 15 degrees and snowy that still feels more like Christmas to me.

When my wife, Linzy, and I lived in Chicago, we had a number of December days that were 15 degrees and snowy. Every year, on one of these days, we would do a Christmas date in the city. We would enjoy all of the beautiful lights, the outdoor German Christmas market, the stores decked out with holiday decorations, and all of the cheer.

As you might expect, not many of the holiday festivities in Chicago (or San Francisco or Palo Alto, for that matter) had anything to do with Jesus. But there was one group of people who wanted to remind everyone else that Christmas was actually about Christ. This group, the self-proclaimed “God Squad,” would set up a larger-than-life-sized nativity scene in one of the large outdoor plazas downtown.

The goal of the God Squad was admirable. They wanted to use the holidays as an opportunity to tell people about Jesus. The method—well that’s debatable, even in the Midwest. But even if this nativity scene was successful in pointing people to Jesus, I would be worried that people would come away with an incomplete picture of who Jesus really is and what Advent is really about.

When you think of Advent, the nativity is probably one of the first things that come to mind. But it was not always this way.

Advent, Latin for “coming,” has been observed by followers of Jesus since the fourth century AD as a

time of reflecting on the coming of Christ. Originally, however, Advent was not focused on the first coming of Christ (the nativity), but on his second coming (when he will return as Judge and King). Eventually, Advent became equally focused on the first and second comings, with the first two weeks looking forward to Christ’s return and the second two weeks looking back at the nativity.

Unfortunately, in current practice, Advent has become almost entirely focused on the nativity. That does not change the fact that you and I are people living *between the advents*—between the first and second comings of Christ. Jesus has come, and Jesus will come again. As such, we must be careful to not only look back to the nativity, but also to look forward to the return of Christ—the second advent. And that is what we are going to do this morning.

Today is the third week of our Advent series called “With.” The first week, we looked back at the birth of Jesus and saw how the incarnation opens the door for a relationship with God. In Jesus, God came to be *with* us.

Last week, we considered the present and looked at how easy it is to get caught up doing things for Jesus that we forget about doing things *with* Jesus. Jesus looks for a relationship with us before he asks for service from us.

Today, we are going to look forward. While this is not part of our Revelation series, we are going to be in the 21st chapter book of Revelation today. In this chapter, John sees a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. In this vision, we get a taste of what life will be like for God’s people when Jesus returns.

As we look at our passage this morning, we are going to see that Jesus is in the business of removing barriers—barriers that separate us from him. As we look at this vision of the final restoration of all things, we will see that one day Jesus will systematically remove every barrier that keeps us from being with him as he always intended. But God’s desire to be with us is not something that is realized only in the distant future. No. Even today, Jesus has partially removed these same barriers that he will one day remove completely. Jesus is in the business

of removing barriers. We experience that in part now, and we will experience it completely when he returns.

In our passage this morning, we will see four specific barriers that Jesus will remove so that we can be with him in the most ultimate sense.

#### **Revelation 21:1-4:**

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”**

There is a lot going on in these verses. Some of it lies on the surface. Much of it requires some digging. In a very real sense, these verses summarize the whole story of the Bible. Each of these four verses contains quotations and allusions to several Old Testament passages, and all of the biggest themes in the Bible are found in these verses. There is a lot here, and it is all good stuff. Let's dive in and see what the Lord has for us today.

### **Creation is Renewed**

Revelation 21:1 serves as an introduction to the rest of the vision. John says he saw “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” John is speaking here of the renewal and restoration of all creation.

We shouldn't understand this as a replacement of the old creation (the world that we live in) with something completely new and different. Rather, it is the recreation, the renewal, the restoration of this world.

It's helpful to think about a parallel between the new creation and the resurrection body of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead, he still had the same holes in his hands and side. He still walked and talked and ate and did other things that he did before. But he also did things like mysteriously appear in rooms without coming through the door, and then disappearing again the same

way he came. It was the same body, but it was entirely different at the same time.

When I first became a dad, I tell people it felt like nothing changed and everything changed at the same time. I was still a husband and a pastor and a friend. I still liked the same food and had the same hobbies. In one sense, being a dad didn't change anything, and yet it changed everything. I was still a husband, but now Linzy and I were also parents together. I still liked the same food, but I just never got to eat it hot anymore. And I still liked going to bed at 9pm, but now no one could judge me for it. Nothing changed. But everything changed.

Something similar is pictured here in Revelation 21. The new creation is not something completely other than the old creation. There is a continuity between the two. Nothing is different. And yet *everything* is different. Everything will be transformed by God's redemptive power. Everything will be renewed. Everything will be restored to the glory that God intended for it.

What does this restoration look like? The first thing that John tells us is that there is no sea in the new creation.

In the ancient world, the sea was a well-known symbol of chaos. It was unknown, dangerous, and unpredictable.

In the book of Revelation, the sea has an even more nuanced symbolism. Instead of merely representing chaos, the sea represents evil. The beast with ten horns and seven heads comes out of the sea (Revelation 13:1). The great prostitute dwells on the sea (Revelation 17:1). The dead lie in the sea (Revelation 20:13).

John's statement that there is no sea is probably not a literal description. Rather, it is a symbolic way of saying that evil will be utterly vanquished in the new creation. This is the first barrier we see that Jesus will remove. Evil itself will be done away with.

Satan will have no power or presence in the new creation. There will be no injustice. No hatred. No violence. No temptation. No addiction. No abuse. No manipulation. No oppression. Evil will finally and completely be defeated. God will be victorious once and for all!

As God's people living on this side of eternity, this vision should create in us an incredible anticipation of God's victory over evil. We must anticipate victory.

In this life, it can be easy to feel like evil is winning. All you have to do is watch the evening news.

But one day, it will become quite obvious that God wins and evil loses. And we ought to anticipate that day with eagerness and longing.

But remember, we are God's people living between the advents. Jesus is coming, but Jesus has already come. And with his coming, he brought the victory of God.

He lived a life of complete moral victory, never once giving into temptation. And then he suffered, was hung on a cross and died. But he didn't stay dead! He rose again three days later. Death couldn't keep him. The grave couldn't hold him. Jesus has already defeated death. He has already defeated sin. He has already won!

Not only do we anticipate God's victory, we also experience God's victory. This happens in the present. This is our reality now! The power of sin has been broken. It no longer controls you. Temptation and addiction no longer have the upper hand because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. Death is no longer to be feared because it is not final. Resurrection is our future.

While evil has not been completely removed, it has been defeated. The war has been won, but the battle continues. But when Jesus returns, the evil that separates us from God will be completely and utterly removed. So the first barrier that Jesus will remove is evil itself.

## The Church is Restored

The second barrier comes in Revelation 21:2.

### Revelation 21:2:

**And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.**

Here the vision gets more specific. In this new creation, John sees a city coming down from God, the new Jerusalem.

This city is described as a "bride adorned for her husband." The sense that we get is that John is not just referring to a city, but to the Church, the people of God. The image of God's people as his bride is a common one in Scripture, but this particular reference comes from Isaiah 62:3-4. In reference to Israel we read: "You shall

be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married."

Since I graduated from seminary and became a pastor four years ago, I've officiated about as many weddings as I've attended. While I absolutely love the privilege of walking with a couple through their engagement and performing their ceremony, I am always a little sad because I have to miss one of my favorite parts of the ceremony: watching the groom's face as he sees his bride enter from the back of the church and walk down the aisle towards him, ready to become his wife.

I still vividly remember that moment in my own wedding. Linzy and I had already seen each other before the ceremony, and yet still, when she walked through those doors at the back of the room, I was filled with delight. I could not believe that this absolutely beautiful woman was about to become my wife. I was giddy!

This is how Jesus will feel about us, the church, in the new creation. We will be to him like a bride adorned for her husband.

It is in this image that we see the second barrier that Jesus will remove: the sin and imperfection of his people.

When I saw Linzy on our wedding day, she was perfect. There was nothing about her I would have changed. This is what a bride and groom do for each other on their wedding day. They look (and act) their absolute best for each other. They prepare themselves for each other.

Throughout Revelation, whenever anything is "prepared," it is prepared by God. That's the sense here as well. We, as the church, don't prepare ourselves for our wedding to Jesus. God prepares us. He is the one who will remove our imperfections, our sins. And after he has prepared us, he will delight in us. He will be giddy for us.

As we wait for the return of Christ, we anticipate this delight. We anticipate Jesus' delight in us, knowing that one day he will remove all of our sins and imperfections.

This is not just our justification, but our sanctification as well. In the new creation, it is not just that God no longer holds our sin against us, which is magnificent in and of itself. In addition to that, we also have ongoing

victory over the sin itself. We will not just be free from the power of sin, but from the very presence of sin.

When Jesus has completed his work of preparation in us—the church, his bride—he will look at us with pure delight. *You are my beloved. You are the one in whom I have joy, in whom I take pride. My delight is in you.* We must long for the day when we will be adorned by Jesus, for Jesus, to receive his delight.

As people living between the advents, as God's people who have already received the righteousness of Christ on account of his work on the cross, we get to experience Jesus' delight even now. We anticipate delight, but we also experience delight.

When, Jesus looks at you today, he looks at you in delight. Do you believe that? Do you believe that Jesus could possibly look at you and be pleased?

Many people don't. There is something deep inside many of us that is convinced that Jesus couldn't possibly be pleased with me. There are a lot of people that look at the church and think that Jesus couldn't possibly be pleased with us. If we are honest with ourselves, there is something that assumes that Jesus couldn't possibly take delight in us given all that filth.

But this is the Gospel, my friends. While we were yet sinners that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He didn't wait for us to prepare ourselves for him. He didn't ask us to clean up filth. He came to us. He died for us. He gave us his righteousness and took our sin on himself.

Now, when God looks at us, he sees the righteousness of his son Jesus. And he is delighted.

## Relationship is Reimagined

We find the third barrier that Jesus deals with in Revelation 21:3.

### Revelation 21:3:

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."**

In this verse, John stops talking about what he is seeing and starts talking about what he is hearing. He hears a voice from the throne. This is probably not God's

voice, but the voice of an angel bringing a message from God.

The message is that God will dwell with his people. The word for "dwell" is literally the word "tabernacle." The tabernacle of God will be with man. He will tabernacle with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

This is one of my favorite verses in the entire Bible. In this verse, we see the culmination of so much of God's redemptive plan.

Ever since the fall, one of the biggest problems for humanity was that we no longer walked and talked with God like Adam and Eve did in the garden. Our sin kept us from experiencing the presence of God like he intended. But God was not content with this arrangement. From day one, he put a plan in motion to restore us back into his presence.

This plan included the tabernacle, a tent where God would meet with his people. It wasn't like the garden, where God just lived with his people. Rather, he concentrated his presence in the Holy of Holies. The only person who could enter this place was the high priest, and he could only do so once a year.

In time, the tabernacle was replaced with the temple, a much more glorious and permanent version of the tabernacle. But with the temple, there was even more separation between God and his people. Outside the Holy of Holies was the Holy Place, where only priests were allowed. Outside of the Holy Place was the court of the Israelites, where only Israelite men could come. Then was the Court of Women, where Israelite women were allowed. Finally there was the court of Gentiles, where anyone was welcome.

So many layers of separation from the presence of God.

But here, in the new creation, we see Jesus removing a third barrier: walls. Walls that separate us from each other and from him.

This includes the *physical walls* of the temple. In the new creation, there is no temple. In fact, the new Jerusalem is the temple—the dwelling place of God. God's presence is not confined to one specific place. We don't have to go anywhere in particular to be with God. God will be everywhere, fully and completely! Jesus will remove the physical walls that once kept people from God.

Jesus will also remove the *artificial walls* that separate people from him. Walls of discrimination based on race, gender, wealth, sexual orientation, citizenship, physical appearance, and on and on. In the new creation, all of God's people will be welcomed equally into the very presence of God to a degree that no one has ever experienced.

The removal of these walls opens the door for greater intimacy with Jesus than we could ever imagine. As we wait for Jesus' return, we should anticipate this intimacy.

I am a huge fan of FaceTime. Every other week, I do a group FaceTime call with some of my closest friends from seminary who live all across the country. We share about our lives and pray for each other. But these video calls are a poor substitute for physically being with each other. On the rare occasion that I get to see these friends face to face, an hour in person together is better for our relationship than a year of FaceTime calls. Presence is essential for intimacy.

Our future is one spent fully and completely in the presence of God. What a glorious future!

As people living between the advents, we not only anticipate this intimacy. We also get to experience this intimacy today.

John 1:14 tells us that "the Word [Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us..." That's the same word that appears here in Revelation. Jesus tabernacled among us. Jesus became the temple. The very presence of God dwelt in him. Jesus is now the place where people come to experience relationship—intimate relationship—with God. We have direct access to the presence of God in Jesus.

What are the walls that keep you from experiencing intimacy with Jesus? Are they walls that you have constructed? Sin in your life that is unconfessed? Are they walls that others have constructed? Are they a feeling of exclusion based on your race or your gender or your sexuality?

Jesus has removed the walls by coming to be with us. We have the opportunity, today, to experience intimacy with God in Christ.

## **Suffering is Removed**

The final barrier that keeps us from being with God is seen in v. 4.

## **Revelation 21:4:**

**"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."**

Suffering is a very real part of the human experience. Sorrow, grief, pain, sadness, tears, death. Nobody makes it through life without experiencing suffering. Oftentimes, the suffering is quite intense.

Suffering was never a part of God's design for creation. And suffering will have no place in the new creation. This is the fourth and final barrier that Jesus will remove.

In the new creation, suffering will be done away with once and for all. Since there is no evil, the source of so much suffering will be gone. There will be no death or violence or oppression that produces so much suffering today. Sickness will be removed. In the new creation, no one will experience pain of any kind.

In the place of pain and suffering, we will find healing. As we wait for Jesus' return, we must anticipate this healing.

God will heal every illness. He will cure every disease. He will restore every relationship. He will overcome every addiction. He will heal every injury that any of his people have ever sustained.

As people living between the advents, we know that this healing is not only something to be experienced in the future. We get to experience that healing in this life.

Where are you experiencing pain in your life? Perhaps it's in a broken marriage. Perhaps it comes from watching your children make destructive decisions. Maybe it comes from a battle with depression and anxiety. For you, it may be physical pain from injury or illness. Or perhaps it comes from watching a loved one experience a pain of their own.

Jesus does not promise to fix all of those things in this life, though we know he ultimately will fix all of that. But in this life, absolute healing is not guaranteed. And yet an incredible amount of healing is available to us in this life.

God may not choose to fix your marriage or cure your anxiety or heal your illness or save your loved one, but he does offer you healing in the midst of pain. He does provide comfort in the most unpleasant situations. He offers peace in the midst of chaos. He offers relationship when we experience isolation. He gives us hope when all hope is lost.

God doesn't promise to remove the pain in this life, but he does promise to be with us in the midst of it.

## **All Things New**

In Revelation 21:5, the scene voice changes. Instead of the angel speaking on behalf of God, Jesus himself speaks.

### **Revelation 21:5:**

**And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."**

Jesus is making all things new. Nothing stands outside of Jesus' healing power. Nothing is beyond his redemptive grasp. One day, all things will be redeemed. All things will be restored. All things will be made new.

God is in the business of removing barriers. Today, nothing can separate us from the love of God. One day, nothing will separate us from his presence either.

At the center of God's redemptive plan is a restored relationship with you and I. This is the hope of Advent.

When you go home and see the nativity set on your coffee table or hanging on your tree or in front of your neighbor's house, remember that Advent is about much more than the nativity. It is about God's intense desire to be with you. That day is coming, and it is already here. Amen.