

WHAT WE'VE ALWAYS WANTED

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 21:1-8
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Revelation 21:1-8

Most of us carry around very powerful computers in our pockets, but that wasn't always the case. I can still remember the first computer we owned as a family.

My two siblings and I had asked for a computer for Christmas. We really wanted an Apple IIe. My brother was excited. My sister was excited. I was over-the-top excited. This would have been a large-sized present, so we did what you're not supposed to do in December: we went looking for it.

My sister found it in the attic—several boxes stacked in a corner. There it was, just waiting to be opened on Christmas day. Finding the computer made us even more excited. We could barely contain ourselves.

In one sense, knowing that the computer was in the attic made it so much harder to wait for Christmas morning. I wanted to unbox the thing right away and start using it! But in another sense, it made it easier to wait. I knew that what I really wanted was coming. All I had to do was to stay alive for a few more weeks, and I would have a computer.

Do you know that feeling of waiting for something you really want? A vacation? Graduation? The weekend? If I asked you right now, would you have something that you're waiting for? Something you really want?

What if I told you that you could have it? That you could have what you've always wanted? That all you had to do is to wait a little bit longer for it. But that it is there, in the attic waiting for you.

We are close to wrapping up our series on Revelation that we've called "Wake Up." Throughout this series, we've encountered a dramatic vision of Jesus. We've seen Jesus in his glory. We read through the seven letters he wrote to the churches. We saw him judging the earth and Satan, clearing the way for something new.

This morning, we finally get to see that new thing. This morning we see Jesus offering what we've always wanted.

Last week Scott Grant walked us through Revelation 20. We saw the final battle with Satan. We saw the great white throne of judgment. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire, along with anyone who continued to reject God. And with that scene, God's final work of clearing away evil was completed.

Everything we've been looking at for the past nine months comes together in the final two chapters of this book. We'll start this week by looking at Revelation 21:1-8. Eight simple verses, but they mark the conclusion of the many threads that have been woven throughout this book.

More than that, we're going to see the conclusion of the entire Biblical story in these verses. From the first words of Genesis to the story of God's people in the Old Testament, to the prophets of old, to the Gospel stories of Jesus, we'll see how all those roads converge in this passage.

Even more than that, we're going to see how our hearts point to these passages. We're going to see how everything we've always wanted—all our desires and goals and ambitions—find their end in this story. This is where God had planned for things to go all along. This is the grand conclusion.

We're also going to realize that the end of the story isn't really an end after all. The end of the story is actually a beginning. And maybe this story that we've found ourselves in is only a prelude or a precursor to something much greater and grander than we could ever imagine.

I remember distinctly a feeling I had when I graduated from college. It was a feeling of something vast opening up before me. Up until that point, every decision I had made in my life had involved choosing from a set of very pre-defined options: which classes do I take? Which sports do I play? What activities do I participate in? Which college to go to? Which major to select?

But upon graduating from college, I felt as if the choices were infinite. I could live anywhere. I could do anything. I could begin life in a thousand different

directions. One thing had ended: years of education and preparation for life. Something entirely new was beginning, and it seemed to be of a completely different nature. It was not what I was used to at all.

That's the sense we should have this morning as we encounter the ending to the story that is really a beginning of something new. This picture of eternity is bigger and broader than anything we could imagine. My prayer is that we recognize these words as describing what we've always wanted.

It's not that we wake up in the morning wanting a new heaven and a new earth. But in this grand promise that God gives us, we can recognize the fulfillment of every desire which lives within our heart.

A new experience

The world has been cleared of evil. Satan has been defeated. Death has been destroyed. We are primed for something new. That's exactly what we get.

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."

The Bible begins in Genesis 1:1 with these words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Now, at the conclusion of the story that Genesis began, we see a new beginning, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth."

The first two chapters of Genesis are absolutely foundational for understanding the story of God's work in the world. God created the universe. He fashioned man and woman with a calling to steward the world. Their crime against God caused a whole host of consequences. Their life of perfection had been lost. Finally, they were cast out of the Garden he had built for them.

The whole of the Old Testament describes God's work to repair the damage done in the garden. After trying the Law and making them a nation and giving them land and anointing a king, nothing solved their problem. And so the prophets began to talk about something altogether new. In Isaiah 65:17, the prophet records God saying, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind."

Here, at long last, we see what the prophets were talking about. Each of God's actions from the first chapters of Genesis is mirrored in Revelation 21 and 22. There is a new creation. God's people are given a new calling to reign with him. There are no more crimes or criminals—they have all been dealt with. The consequences of mourning and crying and pain are nowhere to be found. The humanity is welcomed into the paradise they had formerly been cast out of.

Thousands of years of human and biblical history reach their culmination in these simple words, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth."

What do those words do for you? What do they unlock within you?

People may have a problem with Christians. They may think the church is a mess. They may disagree with political or social issues that prominent Christians have taken. They may see hypocrisy and compromise. But I think these words can unlock something within anyone.

What do you want? What do you want to do? What do you want out of life? What do you think would make you happy? What is this whole thing all about?

Read what the author C.S. Lewis says in his book *Mere Christianity*:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.¹

If I pay attention to the desires that I find within myself, I find something that no experience in this world can satisfy. And these words—this picture of a new world without pain or hurt—ignite that desire.

My first invitation to us this morning is simply to listen to that desire. Listen to what it is that you really want and I think you'll find it ringing in these words.

There is so much that I want. I want to enjoy good food. I want to live life to the full. I want to savor the intimacy of sex. I want to enjoy the companionship of friends. I want to live in peace and tranquility. I want never to have pain again but feel the joy of life.

But when I pursue all those things, I find that none of them really gets me what I want. Each of them is good and beautiful in their own way, but they don't really satisfy me. I can never get enough. It's as if those desires aren't there just for themselves, but that they point to something else.

Solomon says:

Ecclesiastes 3:11:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

It's as if there's something in my heart—something I'm not even aware of; something secret that God placed there. I can't totally access it. I can't understand it fully. But I know it's there.

Then I read of this end that is actually a beginning, and something clicks. Could these verses in Revelation 21 be describing the eternity God has put in my heart?

Shortly after Jesus died and rose from the dead, he surprised some of his followers. They were walking from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus before everyone knew about the resurrection. Jesus started walking with them, but they didn't recognize him. But the story says that he talked them through the Old Testament and showed them how everything there pointed to Jesus.

Luke 24:32:

"They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?' "

As Jesus spoke to them and showed them the fulfillment of prophecy, something burned in their hearts. Maybe it was the eternity that Solomon spoke of.

Could these words touch the same thing? "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" (Revelation 21:4).

Doesn't something burn within your heart when you hear of this kind of a world? When you think of a father wiping away your tears, clearing away death and forever removing pain from your life? Isn't that what you want? Is this God who you want?

As the passage continues, we see what kind of God does this.

The God who makes new

In the next several verses, we have seven statements spoken from the one seated on the throne. The first four have mostly to do with who God is and what he does. The last three have to do with the people of his new creation.

We'll start by looking at the statements about God.

Revelation 21:5-6a:

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." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Over the past several weeks, I have been haunted—in a good way—by this phrase, "Behold, I am making all things new." They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but I think these seven words are worth a thousand pictures.

This phrase is said in the present tense. This is not something God has done or will do but something that he is doing. In fact, I think this is what God is always doing. This is simply who God is!

The continual "I am making all things new" stands in contrast to the definitive "It is done." God has done something in time and within history so that he can always be about the work of making things new. God is a God who makes things new.

Jesus hinted at this aspect of God's character when he walked the earth. He explained in the book of Mark:

Mark 2:21-22:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

Jesus was doing new things because God is a god who makes things new.

Think about that. Nothing in our experience—nothing of our own creation, nothing in God's creation, nothing that we have ever experienced—gets newer. This goes against the very passage of time. Something is created, and by the definition of how we understand the passage of time, it is always getting older.

My computer gets slower. My phone stops working as well. My house starts to fall apart. The trees in our yard grow old. Even things that last a very long time such as the ruins of ancient Israel that I recently visited—even though they've lasted longer than most things—they still decay.

This highlights one of the most basic problems we face as humans: the passage of time. We don't know what to do with it. When you're young, you wish you were older. When you're old, you reminisce about younger days. I look forward to things and anticipate their arrival, but then they're gone, and I remember the good times.

I fight against the passage of time. Or I try to accelerate it. I don't know what to do until I think about relaxing into the arms of a God who makes things new. This is what I really want. I want to give over my life to this kind of a God. When we listen to our desires, I think we'll see that this is who they point to.

Instead of worrying and working and managing time, we can let God make things new.

In preparation for this message, I had a phone conversation with a friend who is a physicist at Stanford. I wanted to understand what we really know about time and space and how that might relate to what God is doing here.

My friend said something really helpful. He told me that the human mind is best equipped to see "medium-sized things." We can see the kinds of things which

occupy the majority of our daily experiences—the kinds of things we need to be able to see in order to survive and thrive in our world.

But we're not well suited to looking at very large things or very small things. We have trouble grasping the massive scale of the cosmos. We have trouble understanding the infinitesimal scale of quantum physics. And it's not just hard for our minds to grasp those things—our math and science and physics have trouble explaining and mapping those areas.

We're making progress in studying the grand and the tiny. But we are pushing hard against the very limits of our capabilities as we do so.

So it would make sense that we have trouble understanding a God who always makes things new. That kind of a God violates our understanding of time and space. That kind of a God is not a "medium-sized thing." He is bigger and smaller than anything we can comprehend. He is the beginning and the end.

He is more ancient than anything I've ever known. But somehow he makes things new.

I don't understand this. But it's what I want. And more than that, it's what I see God doing in my life even now. After almost 20 years of marriage, God is helping my wife and me to work on new patterns. After 70 years of a church, God is leading PBC into new things. Even as I get older, God is doing something new within me. As 2 Corinthians 4:16 states, "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."

This is what I want. So how do I get there? How do I stay connected to God, who makes things new?

Choosing the path

The first four statements of the seven focused on who God is. The next three focus on people. They answer the question: who gets to experience this kind of newness? Who is this for?

Revelation 21:6b-8:

To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers,

idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

There are two paths here. The people on the first path are described in two ways. The people on the second path are described in a list.

"To the thirsty, I will give from the spring of the water of life" is one of my favorite descriptions of those who follow Jesus. It's also taken from an Old Testament prophecy found in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:1 has the incredible invitation, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

This invitation is everything that we've been saying. Followers of Jesus are the ones who are thirsty in this world. But they have recognized the true source of the thirst. We have realized that when we follow our desires, they lead us to Jesus. We wake up and stop trudging through life. We find life to the full and see where everything is headed.

But followers of Jesus are also described as "the one who conquers." We've seen this phrase before in the book of Revelation. It appeared at the end of most of the letters to the seven churches. "To the one who conquers, I will give" repeatedly. And in fact, we see all those promises fulfilled in the last two chapters of Revelation.

Conquering sounds difficult. It sounds like a lot of work. But in another one of his letters, John helps us to understand what he means. In 1 John 5:5, he writes using the exact same language in Greek, "Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Conquering is just holding onto our faith, even if it is small and weak and full of doubts. Allowing God to work in us to make things new.

The alternative is described with a long list, but it's the first and last in the list which gives away what's most important. It begins with "cowardly" and ends with "liars." It's the cowardly and the liars who have chosen the second death instead of eternal life.

This alternative is choosing the easy way. Choose not to hold onto faith. Deny the truth of how things really are. Settle for less. Close your eyes and refuse to see the real world that lies beneath everything we perceive.

That's what it means to be cowardly and a denier of the truth.

The irony is that Christians are often accused of just this. We have chosen to believe in a crutch. We have chosen the easy way. We plug our ears to the sound of science and close our eyes to the truth of our modern conclusions about life. But in fact, the opposite is true.

The way of Christ is the way of courage and truth: choosing faith, choosing your thirst, choosing to follow the one who conquers by walking into death. That's courage. And it's everything else around us that is giving in. Life makes no sense apart from the world view of this ancient book. An infinite, eternal God who loves us, created us, redeems us, and holds things together. This way of Christ explains everything.

So what do we do? Just what we've been saying—we follow our desires, and we believe in the conquering of Jesus. Thirst and believe.

Don't give up. That's the main point of this entire book. Stay thirsty. Stay faithful. Recognize the eternity in your hearts and see that it points to Jesus.

We are—all of us—thirsty creatures. The question we have to answer is what to do with our thirst.

Christians often get this question wrong. We are afraid of our thirst. We know that our desires can lead us into trouble, so we push them aside. Stop wanting so much stuff. Stop thinking about sex. Stop obsessing over yourself.

In response to a world which feeds its every desire, we try to starve ours.

But it is the thirsty who will drink from the spring of the water of life without payment. You have to be thirsty to appreciate a glass of water.

Why does God seem far away, and religion seems irrelevant, and church feels boring? Because many of us have buried our thirst and stifled our desires. We live in denial of the part of ourselves, which long for something else. By doing that, we quench the very thing that makes God real.

But maybe these words can release something. Maybe we can thirst again and believe and trust our future to Jesus. This is worth waiting for. We will be conquerors. We will live in constant newness.

Conclusion

As a kid, I wanted that computer so badly. I waited for it. I even saw it before I received it. I experienced the excitement and the anticipation as I waited for Christmas. I had to wait for the celebration of Jesus' first arrival to get what I wanted.

And when I received it, I was so happy. But only for a time. Things got old. I got bored. I thought I wanted a computer. But maybe that's not what I really wanted.

Maybe God was teaching me about my desires. I think he's been doing that my whole life, showing me something about what I really want, and something about waiting.

I think what I want is this new creation. I think I want it so badly that it lies beneath all my desires. In these words in Revelation, we can see it. We've been shown it before we receive it. Here's a picture of it. It's hidden away in the attic. But we have to wait for it. We're not waiting for Christmas—for the first time Christ came. We're waiting for the second Christmas. The return of Jesus.

And when he comes, we'll get what we've always wanted.

What we want will never get old. We'll never get bored. Pain will be gone. God will be with us. Our thirst will be quenched forever. We'll live in a new city. Next week we'll see more about the city. Next week we'll tour the New Jerusalem.

For now, can you see the new heavens and the new earth? Do you feel the echo in your heart? Do you recognize it as what you've always wanted?

God has placed eternity in our hearts. This is what we've always wanted. Wait for it. Thirst. And believe.

Endnotes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1960), Book III, Chapter 10: Hope, 120.

