

Today we are at the culmination of a love story that has spanned from the beginning of time to the end of time, except that it doesn't end. It starts with Jesus and ends with Jesus.

Spoiler alert, the message is that evil is conquered once and for all and Heaven and Earth are aligned!

Revelation is a book of perfect symmetry that contains numbers that represent perfection and balance such as 7, 12, 24 and 144 and numbers that represent imbalance and imperfection in 666 reserved for Satan.

When God created Adam, he placed him in the Garden of Eden a paradise and he communed with Adam in the garden. Adam and Eve disobey God and were banished from the garden and no-one was able to see the face of God in the stories of 65 books. In the last book, Revelation, Jesus invites us back to Paradise to be with him and we see him face to face!

I think there are three big areas we might cover;

Firstly how do we interpret the picture of heaven in this passage described as it is in such colourful language.

Secondly how does this accord with the things that are said about heaven during his life on earth

And.. finally what questions does this throw up for us and for non Christians? Should heaven be something we look forward to eagerly and if so what does having a heavenly mindset look like in our life on earth?

And... maybe we should before that decide if this is a reliable source?

1/ How do we interpret what is going on in this passage and in the book of Revelation? We need to have a first century understanding of the numbers and images that would have been a code book for them and would have not needed an explanation. During the Iraq war there were many who felt that we were used by America to justify actions of war they already wanted to take and needed the UK to join them not so much for our firepower but to give support to their actions. This view was described in a cartoon of an eagle carrying a forlorn bulldog in its claws and flying off. In the 21st century West, we understand that the eagle is the symbol of a powerful country of America and the bulldog is the symbol of the small islands of Great Britain characterised by their tenaciousness in standing up to Hitler in WW2. The meaning is clear to us.

Revelation is not so much a photograph of a set of future events but more like an abstract painting whose truth and power lie not in the meaning of every brush stroke but the overall effect as we stand back and let the whole picture make its impact on us.

You have heard from Bernard and Val, excellent narratives about the Book of Revelation and I am seeking to build on that. Churches rarely cover this book perhaps either because it seems a bit weird (Bernard's words!), or a bit depressing as a picture of a cataclysmic destruction of the earth that will precede the Rapture and the entry to heaven of the 'lucky ones'.

You may say, I don't want to be around for that destruction and anyway, why would God wreak that havoc on the earth, God is love after all.

I think the key here is that the pictures in the book do not describe one big event that is to come, but the whole sweep of Christian history, what has happened in the past, what is happening now and what will happen in the future. Seen like this it all starts to make sense. Around us are wars, famine, plague and pestilence in our history, happening now and because of the nature of man, this will continue.

What couldn't have been understood by the first century church, but is clear to us now is that as man has eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, our ability to destroy our planet through the actions of perhaps a few people working for Satan are now close at hand. Through nuclear warheads, biological experimentation, pollution on earth and now in space, global warming, and population increases creating pressure on the earth's resources.

Are there any of the scenarios in the end of Revelation that haven't occurred or seem frighteningly plausible through man's own hands?

So that is depressing, but it's not of God and the whole of the ministry of Jesus was about telling us about how to live a Kingdom life on earth, we don't have to wait until we die..... and by our collective actions we can 'change the world'.

What did Jesus say about heaven when he was on earth?

The Kingdom of heaven is mentioned 53 times in Matthew, 17 in Mark and 41 in Luke.

Jesus taught us to pray 'Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'

Paul explained in Ephesians 2 8-9 that we are saved by the grace of God not through our own works

In the Sermon on the mount, Jesus explains the type of people who inhabit heaven, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers.

In John Jesus tells us that he goes to prepare a place for us in Heaven and that it is where he is and wants us to be there too and so he is preparing us for heaven

Jesus often spoke about his Father in Heaven, he encouraged us not to store up treasures on earth because they rust or can be stolen by thieves but instead to store up treasures in heaven

Jesus told us that all heaven rejoices when one sinner repents, we hear that our prayers are stored in heaven in bowls

Jesus told us that we should seek first the kingdom of heaven and he spoke even more about eternal life than he did about heaven.

So we can conclude that Heaven is a destination, a place where we can inhabit with him and his Father and when we follow his teaching we have seen glimpses of heaven on earth in our history when the Holy Spirit is manifest and all earthy concerns disappear. Then we have seen healings and miracles such as we read in the gospels, we have seen people overcome with joy and love such as we read in the day of Pentecost. Emmy Wilson, a staff member at HTB shared her testimony last week and I will include this link in my notes.

Has anyone heard about the Toronto blessing, or better still had first hand experience of it?

In the 1990s there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Toronto. People who went there experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and it returned with them such that as they were praying for people whole groups would be struck to the floor in a wave of love, laughter, healing, joy! Emmy speaks of holding the hand of one of the Dallas and feeling as it she was receiving a massive charge of volts through her body.

The passage for today only makes sense when we speak in these terms. Jesus came to bring us ZOE life, abundant life, life that could experience joy in all circumstances. Without this understanding, the prospect of an eternal life worshipping could sound rather tedious couldn't it? What do you think?

Let's look at our passage for today which describes eternal worship of Jesus.

John knew Jesus intimately, he spent three years with him and we know Jesus loved him. He is the only disciple's to have escaped a Martyr's death, something Jesus foretold. Here he recounts the words of Jesus to him and he would know that it was Jesus.

The words are spoken by Jesus and relayed to first century Christians who were undergoing intense persecution. Here Jesus wants to encourage them and us that the world is still within God's control even though it seems as if it is out of control. So we see a glimpse of heaven before we see what events will take place... so that we can keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and look at all events with a heavenly mindset.

The symbolism in this passage needs explaining, but it is important not to get lost in the detail and miss the 'big picture'.

John sees someone on a throne who we discover is Jesus, he has taken his rightful place

The one on the throne is a bright light (like jasper and carnelian) so bright and the most precious of stones

The 24 elders clothed in white and with gold crowns, their clothes represent purity and light bow down to Jesus being the 12 patriarchs in the old testament and the 12 apostles, thus representing the whole church, Jews and Gentiles who are part of God's family.

Lightning and thunder are connected with spiritual events in heaven, often portrayed in the OT as representing God's power and majesty and in Exodus we read of lightning when God have his laws to the Israelites.

In verse 5 we seven torches with burning flames in front of the throne which we are told is the sevenfold Spirit of God, which is another name for the Holy Spirit,

In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass sparkling like crystal. This highlighted the magnificence and holiness of God and of peace.

The 4 living creatures perhaps represent the whole created world; the lion being the king of the wild beasts, the ox supreme among cattle, the eagle the king of birds and man the crown of God's creation. All nature and all humanity praise God! Other commentaries suggest that they represent the characteristics of God power (the lion), faithfulness (the ox),intelligence (the human), and sovereignty(the eagle).

And then we see a picture of continual corporate worship , all creatures in heaven and earth will praise and honour God because he is the creator and sustainer of everything.

We see subsequently the opening of the scrolls by the Lamb (Jesus) and Jesus is enthroned with God the Father (5;7).

Does this sound attractive? Maybe...maybe not

When Jesus lived on earth he described a journey to Heaven in many parables... the Kingdom of Heaven is like... a mustard seed, a pearl of great price, leaven, parable of the sower, parable of the wheat and the tares, like a fisherman catching fish. The road is narrow and few will travel it, it is hard to enter the kingdom of heaven if burdened down by earthly treasures, don't store up treasures on earth that can rot and be stolen, store up treasures in heaven. These show how some will succeed in the journey and some will not. He has shown us what we need to do...

My favourite is that one has to be like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven, or to be reborn he says to Nicodemus. The reason I like the picture of the child is it speaks of us putting down our desire to be in control and to trust the person looking after us, to not challenge what they tell us and to do what they say.

If we have that childlike faith and our lives are geared to pleasing our Father, then we enter into the scene described in this passage today. We already know that Satan can't touch us because in accepting Jesus into our lives we are literally sealed. His sacrifice on the cross atones for our sins past and future so that we can enjoy the grace of God that Paul speaks of. We do things not because we HAVE to, or because we SHOULD do, but because we WANT to.

How can we make sense of this being an attractive thing to spend the rest of eternity doing?

Can you recall a time when you felt you had a real experience of God, through worship, through prayer and you just knew that he was there loving you, forgiving you, lifting you up?

Could you imagine being in that place 24-7?

Many martyrs have gone to their deaths smiling because that is just how they felt. Paul said that to stay on earth and continue his ministry or to die and be face to face with the Father were equally good choices.

Does anyone have a cat? Don't they find the warmest spot in the house, curl up and purr with contentment? I do wonder what they dream about? Does God speak to cats in dreams?!

Or imagine you are going on holiday and after a difficult journey full of flight delays and tired from carrying heavy luggage you arrive at your destination, put your bags down and sit in a chair watching the sun go down. You sigh and say yes it was worth going all through that for this moment.

There are bags of questions... do I get a new body, will I recognise people I have known there, will I get to ask God some questions like why did you not smote Satan at the outset?....

But whether you are a Christian or not, man has pondered the question of what happens after we die and come up with different answers. Quite prevalent today is the idea that we are reincarnated . Most religions or philosophies assume that there is some sort of judgement and according to how that goes it might go well or badly for us. This is particularly true of Islam, where a believer who fails the trial by scales which measure good and bad decisions in life is roasted for eternity whereas a good outcome is associated with abundant earthly pleasures. Even Egyptian Pharaohs who took

their wealth with them into the after life were not certain of escaping having their hear gobbled up by a crocodile like creature if they failed the scales test...

Christianity is unique in accepting that we are flawed beings but allowing us redemption through the blood of Christ and that is worth celebrating for eternity. And if we are right then we will want this for everyone else as God does.

Does God need our praise to make him feel good about himself? No! He knows that when we forget about ourselves and count our blessings we will feel much better!

Research has not proven this; An experiment where people recalled at bedtime three positive things about the day was found to lead to improved health. Does that sound like the wisdom of 'Counting your blessings? Also research has found that helping other people improves our mental health! ... and we have a mental health epidemic with one in 4 identified last week as having mental health issues, and the current western culture centred around self (don't get me started on Harry!).

Jesus told us in John 16:33 that when on earth, that there would be difficulties in the world and that we couldn't extend our lives a jot by worrying about things. Instead we should take note that God feeds and clothes the birds of the air and trust that it is his earnest desire to do the same for us. We should take heart because he has overcome the world.

So in Revelation when he says in Revelation 4 v1 'Come up here and I will show you what must happen after this', it is only an extension of his teaching described in Matthew.

In Matthew 16:19 Jesus tells

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

So Jesus is making the connection between heaven and earth and as he has been given the keys by the Father, he passes them onto his church, how amazing is that?

So many of us feel powerless, lacking in any real spiritual authority but this tells us we HAVE THE AUTHORITY!

I have been frustrated attending secular funerals, what can they say if speaking in earthly terms about something that is beyond this world?... the book of life for xxx has been written and the ink is dry on the final chapter and so the book closes now but the person will be remembered by those who loved xxx so they will not be forgotten. TOSH!! ... and how depressing.

The world needs to hear the truth about the amazing gift on offer and we are called upon to share the good news of the gospel, Jesus is alive and we get to share in the party that celebrates that fact!

Moses face shone after meeting God and no-one could look on his face, but in heaven we can do that and our faces will shine!

We try to put God in a box and our small minds mean we restrict the possibilities of his power and majesty. It's like looking at the stars over Canterbury, you see a few at best but have you ever seen the stars in a remote location, you look up and go WOW!!!

I love watching children transfixed by a pebble or a stick on the pavement whilst the mother tries to hurry them onto their destination. The child is going WOW!!

Satan is mixing with the Truth so we even have an American denying that a school shooting happened when we know it did! A man says he is a woman when it's clear he is a woman. Harry says I had to speak Truth to Power! What is truth said Pilot?

So what is our takeaway from Today? The world needs to know about Jesus and about the joy of heaven and to speak THE TRUTH into our troubled world. Nothing about what is going on surprises God and in the end he will defeat Satan and we will be in a perpetual state of joy with no more sickness, no more pain, so when the world sees Christians being joyful and kind and loving then they will want to know more!

Let's worship with joy now!