

Revelation 22 The end meets the beginning

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If you know what's going to happen at the end of the journey,
it can make it much easier to face the bumps along the way.
We've been locked down for what seems like quite a while now.
It would be easier to endure the necessary sacrifices
if we knew that getting rid of the virus would make it stay away.
But of course it doesn't.
We could get to covid normal.
And then an asymptomatic taxi driver
could spread it to 100 customers in a week.
It's the uncertainty about the outcome
as much as the high cost in the present
that causes some public reluctance.
You are more likely to be willing to endure sacrifice now
if you know that there will be a payoff later.

Revelation 22 is a picture of heaven.
It's designed to encourage us to endure the bumps along the way now
because we know there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.
And unlike the outcome of the lockdown,
the outcome of your faith is sure.
But what is the pot of gold?
What awaits us at the end?

Revelation 22 is the last page of the Bible.
It tells us how the story finishes.
And like many novels,
the end has echoes of the beginning.
Do you remember how the story started?
Way back in Genesis chapter 2,
there is the story of the garden of Eden.
There's a river of life giving water flowing through the garden.
We know how important water is in dry and dusty Australia!

Here in the heavenly city,
in the new Jerusalem,
there's a river of life giving water
flowing through the main street of the city.

And then there's the tree of life.

Do you remember how the tree of life was planted
in the garden of Eden?

After Adam and Eve ate
from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,
then they were removed from the garden
so that they couldn't eat from the tree of life and live forever.
Here is the tree back again.

After not appearing from Genesis 3 to Revelation 21,
it pops up here again in Revelation 22.

Right at the end.

But I want to let you in to a little secret about the tree of life.

There's a normal word in Greek for a tree.

It's dendron.

We use it as part of the word Rhododendron.

Comes from two Greek words.

Rose, tree. Rhododendron = rose tree.

Dendron is the word Jesus used when he said,

"A good tree bears good fruit."

But that's not the word that is used here.

The word for tree here

is another word that is used for another kind of tree.

Let me read you the other uses of this word for tree
outside of Revelation.

Acts 5:30 "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead -
whom you killed by hanging him on a tree!"

Acts 13:28-29 "Though they found no proper ground for a death
sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.

When they had carried out all

that was written about him,

they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb."

1 Pet 2:24 "He himself bore his sins in his body on the tree,
so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness."

Let me put it this way.

There's only one variety of tree that this word for tree gets used for.
It's the cross Jesus was crucified on.

In fact, I cheated a little bit.

All those verses I read out,
if you read them in our 2011 NIV
the word actually gets translated cross not tree.

But it's the same word we read in Rev 22.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life.

Which tree?

The cross of Jesus.

The leaves from that tree provide healing for the nations.

That's the tree that gives life.

How does it give life.

By taking away the curse that has lain over creation since the fall.

In the garden of Eden,
everything was made to work perfectly.

It was paradise.

But then when Adam and Eve disobeyed,
God cursed the ground so it would bear thistles and weeds,
so that Adam would have to toil and sweat in order to survive.

In the city of God,
there is no longer any curse.

Can you see it there in verse 3?

"No longer will there be any curse."

Anyone who's ever held down a job knows that work brings frustration.
Nothing ever goes the way it ought to.

You seem to spend half your time fixing up other people's mistakes,
getting faulty equipment repaired,

chasing other people to try to get them to do their jobs properly.

Even in the garden there are constant reminders of the curse.

Why is it that the birds and the snails eat all your seedlings

but they never eat the weeds growing right next to them?

In the new creation,
life won't be like that.

We will have moved back from Genesis 3 to Genesis 2.

Back into the era before the curse.

One of the results of Adam and Eve's disobedience
was that people couldn't look upon God and live.

God's holiness would fry a human who looked upon him
in the same way an ant who crawls into a log fire gets fried.

Many times in the OT people are told
that no one can look upon God and live.

Moses is especially privileged.

He gets to look upon God's back through a crack in the rock.

But that's all that even the best of us can cope with.

God's holiness is just so bright.

And yet there's a very famous blessing of the high priest Aaron –
Moses' brother.

“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.”

Although the people were not allowed to see God

because his holiness would burn them up,

they looked forward to a time when they could look upon God's face,
and his face would shine upon them and give them light.

And that's the picture in the new Jerusalem.

In verses 4-5,

“God's people will see his face ...

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 himself will give them light.”

In summary, the picture we are given of heaven,

is one of a return to creation before the fall.

Everything is put to right.

Life is the way God designed it to be –

peace, contentment and joy.
People walking with their creator in harmony.
And people are being abundantly provided for.
I look forward
to a crop of nectarines and apricots on our fruit trees this year.
But the tree of life
the cross of Jesus
which grows on the banks of the river in the new Jerusalem
has a crop each month.
It's God's overflowing provision.
As king David said,
"My cup overflows."
Everything we need and more.

There's so much similarity
between the new creation and the garden of Eden,
that you might be tempted to think
that the end will be the same as the beginning.
But there are some key differences.
The garden of Eden was paradise.
It was good.
But there was a snake.
It had the seeds of its downfall.
But the new creation comes after the defeat of the devil.
Last week we read that the devil was thrown into the lake of fire.
So in the new creation,
there is no possibility of things going wrong.
God's people will reign with him for ever and ever.
There has been movement from creation to new creation.
It's a movement from one paradise to a paradise
that is greater and more perfect.

The other key movement from the garden of Eden to the new creation
is that it's a move from a garden to a city.

Have you ever wondered why God bothered to make the world?
God knows the future, right?

He knew that Adam and Eve would disobey.

He knew that he would have to send his only Son to die on a cross.

He knew all that in advance.

Why did he bother to make the world?

It was because he wanted people to enjoy his creativity with him.

He wanted people to enjoy relationship with him.

There's was a guy call Alfred Nicholas.

He was the founder of the first Melbourne company to make aspirin.

He made a stack of money

and gave some to endow the Lord Somers camp down the road.

Another thing he did with his money

was to plant a beautiful garden in the Dandenongs.

But there's not much point to a beautiful garden by itself.

Alfred Nicholas wouldn't have enjoyed

walking around his beautiful garden by himself.

One of the joys of creating something,

is to watch the pleasure that others have from enjoying it.

So Nicholas opened the garden to the public.

You can still go to visit it today.

The movement from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem
is a movement from a garden to a city –

it's a movement from a population of 2 – Adam and Eve –

to a population that no one can count.

To people from every tribe and nation.

To people more numerous than the sand on the seashore.

God made the world,

despite all the pain that he knew that would cause,

because he wanted to share the new creation with you and me.

He wanted to be surrounded by his people.

The new creation is better than the old one

because there are more people to enjoy it.

God is glorified

when he is surrounded by people praising him for his goodness.

Just as in a similar but lesser way,
Alfred Nicholas is glorified
when people walk through his garden
and comment on his foresight and generosity.

We've come to the end of John's vision.

The book of revelation ends here.

What's the point of it?

God didn't send this vision to John

because John was special,

and God wanted John to know things about the future
that no one else would know.

We know that because the end of the book tells us.

Verse 10 says,

"Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book."

Verse 16 says,

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel

to give you this testimony for the churches."

Jesus doesn't want John to take these visions

and keep their contents to himself.

These visions are for the churches.

John is just acting as a mouthpiece for God's word.

His job is to get the word out.

Now that's interesting.

Because in my experience,

the words of John's vision

are effectively sealed up in many of the churches.

Revelation has been regarded as a bit of an opaque book,

and those who want to open its contents

have been regarded as eccentric.

But Jesus says this is testimony for the churches!

He showed John the visions because he wanted us to read them!

I hope that this sermon series

has removed the seal on the book of Revelation for you,

if indeed there was one there to begin with.

I hope so,
because Jesus wants you to read the visions.

Why does Jesus want you to read these visions?

Why does he want you to have the vision of the new creation –
the New Jerusalem with the river and the tree of life?

Why does he want you to read about the dragon, the seals,
and the throne room of God with the lion
who looks like a slaughtered lamb?

Is it just so you can understand the distant future?

Is it intellectual knowledge without a purpose in the here and now?

Well no.

Absolutely not.

These visions of the future are an encouragement and a warning.

There have been basically two sorts of visions
in the book of Revelation.

Visions of the blessings which are waiting for those who follow Jesus.

And Visions of the terrible judgements
on those who defy God and do wrong.

So the message of the book is,

“Obey God.”

Do what is right.

Follow the Lord Jesus,

and pay attention to eternity.

It’s easy to make the mistake of thinking that eternity is a long way off.

In verse 6 the angel says to John,

“The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets,

sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

In verse 7, Jesus says,

“Behold, I am coming soon!”

In verse 10, the angel says,

“The time is near!”

In verse 12, Jesus says,

“Behold, I am coming soon!”

And in verse 20, Jesus says,

“Yes, I am coming soon.”

Each of us is only a heart beat away
from the New Jerusalem or the lake of fire.

That shouldn't make you worried.

You have heard of the glories of the New Jerusalem.

You know what is required to enter.

In the words of verse 14,

“Blessed are those who wash their robes,
that they may have the right to the tree of life
and may go through the gates into the city.”

There are no washing machines in the book of Revelation.

The only place you can wash your robes is in the blood of the lamb.

Each of us is only a heart beat away
from the New Jerusalem or the lake of fire.

That shouldn't make you worried.

But it should stop us from being complacent.

Either about ourselves

or those to whom we are called to give witness.

The stakes are high and the mission is urgent.

John finishes with one last word of warning.

22:18-19 "I warn everyone

who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll:

if anyone adds anything to them,

God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll.

And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy,

God will take away from that person

any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City,

which are described in this scroll."

Well I seriously doubt that any of you are tempted

to sit down and write your own version of Revelation

with some extra bits.

But I don't think that's really what John has in mind.

Some people have their own dreams or visions
which they take as God speaking to them.
And they may or may not be correct in that.
But even if they are correct,
your personal vision never wields the same authority as God's Word.
Your personal vision may give you a sense
of how God wants you to serve him.
But it can never command the church in the same way as the Bible does.
And if you sought
to make your own private revelation binding on others,
then you would be guilty of adding to John's prophecy.
Some people get embarrassed about parts of what John wrote.
For example preachers might preach chapter 1, 4&5, 21&22,
but leave out the rest of the book.
"I'm only going to preach the parts that make people feel good."
You don't have to actually get out your scissors and chop bits out
to take words away from the prophecy.
Just ignoring the parts that don't appeal to you, that's enough.
Don't add or subtract from God's Word.
That's the message.
We must allowed God's voice to be heard.

And when we head God's voice,
then what is the purpose of Revelation?
God knows that there will be things that will distract us along the way.
Things that could tempt us to give up.
But he knows that it's much easier to face the bumps along the way,
if you know what's going to happen at the end of the journey.
So we need to have that picture of the end of the journey
clear in our minds
because when the bumps come,
it will be too late.
When life is a turmoil,
you won't be of a mind to sit down and have a quiet read of Revelation
to focus you on the end of the journey.

You'll be too busy dealing with whatever the crisis is.
So take the time now,
to meditate on the new Jerusalem.
The water of life that comes from Jesus the living water.
The tree of life that is the cross of Jesus,
sustaining and healing the nations.
Seeing God face to face, illuminated by his glory rather than the sun.
These are pictures of your future
that will help you face the bumps along the way now.
This is God's abundant provision for his people in the new creation.
It's a great preparation to weather the storm.