

Revelation 21-22 - Place

The place we all long for is offered to us.

The word 'home' is one of the most emotive words in the English language. Children need a stable home. Young adults for a few short years enjoy the adventure of moving to new places, and living in short term accommodation, but soon the drive to create a stable, secure, comfortable, nest kicks in. For most of us our home is the biggest purchase we will ever make by far, and if we don't buy then it is still our biggest expenditure. Our television watching moves from 'celebrity cribs', to 'location, location, location', to 'a place in the sun.' How many of our day dreams are about where we might live?

The Bible insists that our desire for a home is essentially a good desire. It is as fundamental as our desire to find a life partner. It is as basic as our needs for clothes. Indeed the bible calls clothes and a roof over our head by a common term – 'coverings.' Enjoying our home is as primal a pleasure as enjoying food.

Whales may have been made to wander the oceans. Wolves may be content to prowl the steppes. Swifts may spend the whole year in flight only landing to lay their eggs. But human beings were made for home.

The whole story of the Bible is a movement from home, to homelessness, to home again. These last two chapters of the bible describe in wonderful poetic imagery God's ultimate for his people. It is for them to come home.

Dan explained to us last week that this book, Revelation, is full of images. We are not meant to read it as a history book, but much more like a poem, or at times even a literary version of a cartoon. But the images have deep significance – particularly for those who have read the rest of the Bible.

Last week we saw how God's final purpose for his world involves people, people from all kinds of backgrounds, now perfected, stripped of their sin, brought into the presence of God, resurrected to new life, and now living as we were intended to live – serving God and enjoying him forever.

This week we are going to see where they live. And these chapters are dominated by two big images. The final destination for God's people is a city and a garden.

First of all lets look at the city.

➤ *A new city*

📖 **Rev 21:2**

Cities are a central part of the bible story almost from the beginning. We first see a city in Genesis 4:17. Adam and Eve's son Cain builds a city.

From the start cities were ambiguous. Cain himself has been condemned to be a restless wanderer all of his life because he murdered his brother Abel. When he complains

about his vulnerability God reassures him that he, God, will protect Cain. But immediately after that we find Cain building a city.

The first human purpose of cities was security. That was the primary purpose of iron age forts such as the one at Uffington – above the white horse. Cities have walls. Cain builds his city because he is not content with the security that God has offered him.

Cities spring up from a desire for security but also from a desire for community. The community provided by a city enables division of labour. Not everyone needs to provide food. So we find just a generation of so later that Cain's offspring include those who live in tents and keep livestock, but also makers of musical instruments, and iron and bronze tools. The city has enabled a flourishing of human culture.

But alongside the good aspects of community and human cooperation there are also bad. Just a few chapters later we find human beings banding together to create the city of Babel, which is explicitly opposed to God.

And again and again city building is fuelled by the desire for significance. Great leaders can arise within the security and community of a city. They may be good leaders who bring prosperity to their people but cities fuel pride. Cain named his city after his son Enoch.

From that moment on the Bible story becomes a tale of two cities. There is a city opposed to God – first Babel, which then becomes Babylon. In the New Testament the Roman Empire inherits the mantle of Babylon, it is even called by that name sometimes, and the description of ultimate destruction of Babylon in the earlier chapters of Revelation bears a striking similarity to Rome. The fifth century theologian Augustine of Hippo described human culture which sets itself up against God as 'the city of man.'

But there is a city of God too. In the Old Testament Jerusalem is a place of security with walls, a place of community with human beings cooperating together, a place ruled at its best by a great leader, even named after him – it is the city of David. But more than anything else it is the city of God.

In the New Testament geographical Jerusalem is heading for destruction, but the city of God continues in his church. Jesus called his people 'a city on a hill.' The church is God place of security, God's place of community, named not after Cain's son, but God's – it is the church of Jesus Christ.

So we come to this great description of God's new heaven and new earth. The city of man, Babylon, has been destroyed, and the new Jerusalem is finally brought down from heaven.

Revelation 21 emphasises at least three things. Firstly its perfection.

 **Rev 21:10-14**

The city has all the brilliance of the glory of God. It is Old Testament Israel made perfect – its twelve gates have the names of the tribes of Israel over them. It is God's church

founded on the teaching of the Apostles, finally completed. The twelve foundations are named after the twelve apostles.

It is perfectly square. Actually it is a cube – as high as it is long and wide. Perhaps it is a cube because that is a perfect shape. It is also likely that it is a cube because the innermost room of the Old Testament Temple – the holy of holies, where God dwelt – was also a perfect cube. Dan will be showing us next week how God dwells in this new creation – this city is a gigantic perfect holy of holies.

Its perfection is found in its materials as well. Its walls

 **Rev 21:18**

Its foundations.

 **Rev 21:19-20**

Its gates and main street.

 **Rev 21:21**

Dick Whittington was disappointed by London. We won't be disappointed by the New Jerusalem.

One common objections to Christianity is that it is just too good to be true. But if you think about it for a minute that is completely illogical. That is the logic of the person whose numbers come up on their lottery ticket but who throws it away because 'I don't get that kind of luck.' The logic of a foolish scientist who makes an extraordinary and potentially world changing observation, and ignores it because 'it just cannot be.' The logic of the young man who meets a beautiful girl and has a great evening, and she gives him her number and he never rings her, because 'blokes like me don't end up with girls like that.' They are fools!

Just occasionally you come across something that is too good to be true,... but it is true!!! That is the consistent witness of the first Christians. They weren't gullible brainless primitives – they were intelligent, sceptical, thoughtful people, whose writings still astonish and satisfy many philosophers, and thinkers. Their first reaction was that the resurrection of Jesus, and the promises that he made were too good to be true, but they were persuaded that it was true.

Here is the culmination of the Bible's promises – perfection, perfection, perfection.

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, then you would be a monumental fool to dismiss this.

And if you are a follower of Jesus then your life is not about scratching together the finances for your dream home, and either living in it, or more likely living with the reality that you will never have your dream home, and then slowly having it wrenched away from you as it becomes too much to manage, till you move into a little care home, which takes all your life savings, and finally die in a bed which is not even your own. If

you are a follower of Jesus, the best you have now is just a tent – nice but temporary. But you are heading for perfection. You will not be disappointed.

And look at its size.

 **Rev 21:16**

1400 miles by 1400 miles by 1400 miles. It is almost certainly no accident that 1400x1400 miles was about the size of the known inhabited world. But this is a cube!

This has room enough for all people in all ages. Tragically as Dan said last week not all will enter it. There are far too many people who walk away from the offer – maybe some even here today. But there is room for all.

All classes of people.

 **Rev 21:24b**

All nations of people.

 **Rev 21:26**

Note that ‘the glory and honour of the nations’ will be brought. The new Jerusalem does not have one homogenous culture, but combines all the good of all cultures in it. The food will be biryani, chow mein, fajitas, refried beans, borsch, korma and the roast beef of old England – not all on the same plate you understand.

People will dress in saris, suits, chinos, sombreros. The music will be by Bach, Ravi Shankar and who knows – perhaps an edited version of 50 Cent. Perhaps we will even speak our diverse languages, but as at Pentecost we will still understand each other.

The point is that it will not be a reduced homogenised life – it will absorb all the good from all cultural endeavour in all places and all times and bring them together into this great completion of humanity.

And then look at its security. Remember cities were born from the desire for protection. This city is totally secure.

 **Rev 21:17**

200 feet thick walls. But here is the surprise – it doesn’t really need those walls.

 **Rev 21:25a**

The gates are of course crucial for security. Every city would close its gates at night to prevent enemies entering. But not this one. There is no night. And there are no enemies left.

How much of life is spent worrying about our security? And it is all ultimately useless. It was the ancient philosopher Epicurus who said

"It is possible to provide security against other ills, but so far as death is concerned we men all live in a city without walls."

The city of this world cannot help you – it does not have walls, not least against death. The city of God has impregnable walls now, but in eternity will not need them – the gates will be eternally open – even the last enemy, death, will be no more.

God's ultimate promise is a new city, but this city will contain a new garden.

➤ *A new garden*

Remember in the Bible the city was born, in part at least in sin, but is redeemed by God and becomes the centrepiece of his intentions for his world. The image of the garden in the Bible is similarly ambiguous but in the opposite way to the city.

The garden was of course first made good. God made the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2 its goodness is described in various ways including the presence of gold, aromatic resin and onyx. It is described as a place of freedom – God says “you may eat of any tree in the garden [except one]”. And it is described as a place of life – at the centre of the garden stands the tree of life.

But the garden and God's world by extension was cursed as a result of mankind's sin. The land becomes a place of weeds and toil, they are cut off from the tree of life and they die.

So today the natural world is full of signs of its original goodness but it is troubled by pests, drought and floods.. and we die.

But God's ultimate purpose is to redeem nature itself. Within the city is a new Garden of Eden. It is a place of resurrection life.

Revelation 22:1-2 describe that life in three ways.

First of all life as refreshment – that is the image of the river.

 **Rev 22:1**

There were rivers in the first garden but now there is this central river, flowing from God himself, bringing life wherever it goes.

Then there is life as nourishment, from the tree of life itself.

 **Rev 22:2a**

Nourishment every month for ever.

And finally life as healing.

 **Rev 22:2b**

All our maladies, physical, mental, spiritual are healed in this renewed garden. And all nations once again enjoy life as it was intended.

➔ What are your hopes for life?

➔ Where are you going to focus your legitimate desire to be HOME!?