

## Christian Hope

As I thought about a message for this morning, one thing came clearly to mind. Your minister, Johan, has gone to celebrate and honour the lives of parents he lost during the pandemic. This past week my family also gathered to celebrate the life of my Dad, who passed away in his 97<sup>th</sup> year. So Johan and I have in common death and grief.

Ministers and pastors are called on to do many funerals over the years, and to give comfort to those who are grieving, but in many ways it is quite different when the passing is so personal. Like anyone else, we look for some comfort and hope. It is especially comforting when a parent or family member who passes away is a person of faith, because there are certain promises and visions given in the Bible that are full of hope.

Some will tell you that the hope of heaven is only for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Some will tell you that God's mercy is so free and wide ranging that all will find themselves in heaven, no matter what they believe or do. While there are many possible interpretations of certain Scripture passages, one thing comes through clearly: there are promises regarding what happens after death that are specific to those who follow Jesus Christ.

Those promises are of particular comfort to people whose loved ones were dedicated, committed followers of Jesus.

Today I'd like to consider with you one of those passages, a part of the revelation or vision given to John. The Book of the Revelation is a book full of imagery, much of which is hard to understand, but our passage today, near the close of that revelation, is much clearer as John sees a vision of the glory of God and the wonder of hope.

He writes, *Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup>I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*

This part, near the end of John's vision, has a parallel in the prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah had heard God's promise in similar terms: (65:17-19) *"<sup>17</sup> See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. <sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. <sup>19</sup> I will rejoice over*

*Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.”*

In the revelation John saw, what God had promised to Israel was renewed to all the followers of Jesus. God promises newness.

The picture we are given goes from macrocosm to microcosm, from the far-flung heavens to the personal.

To begin with, the heavens, all that we see when we look up, will become new. Then the earth, the planet where we live, will become new. The Greek term suggests that the newness is distinct: they will be fully re-created rather than simply repaired.

Next, Jerusalem, the holy city, the capital of God’s work on earth, will be made new. The new Jerusalem of John’s vision comes “down out of heaven from God” to show that the city, too, is a new creation, and that the newness is not something humanity creates or makes possible. Its newness is the work of God.

The new Jerusalem is pictured as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. The theme of marriage of God with God’s creation moves throughout the Bible.

Israel is sometimes pictured as God’s bride. Isaiah 49:15-18 “*I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me. Your children hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you. Lift up your eyes and look around; all your children gather and come to you. As surely as I live, declares the Lord, you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride.*”

Zion, or Jerusalem, is mentioned as a bride. Isaiah writes (62:5): *As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*

The church is sometimes seen as a bride. In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul writes, “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*” *This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*”

The bride in John's vision is the city of Jerusalem and the people of God. The church does not replace Israel, but joins with her as the Lord's delight, sharing together in the newness that God alone can give us.

John continues: <sup>3</sup> *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*

Another aspect of this promised newness! Our relationship with our creator God is made new.

What humans had in Eden, that place of bliss and of direct and immediate fellowship with God, the loss of which was caused by humanity's rebellion against God, is fully restored. In John's vision, the chasm that separated us from God is closed, sin is forgiven, community with God restored, and everything returns to wholeness. The beauty of the bride, the newness of Jerusalem and God's faithful people, is a wedding gift from God.

<sup>4</sup> *'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

What a day that will be!

Death will be no more!

Isaiah had promised it (25:6-8) "<sup>6</sup> *On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines.* <sup>7</sup> *On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations;* <sup>8</sup> *he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.*"

Hosea also gave the promise (13:14): "*I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?*"

Paul, knowing the promises from the prophets, adds to them (1 Corinthians 15: 26): "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*" And in verse 54: "*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

Along with the end of death, tears will be dried and there will be no more reason for sadness. With death finished, there will be no reason for mourning. Pain will be at an end. Loss, grief, and separation will no longer be part of our experience. We will be made whole, complete, and everything that brings weeping will be gone. Love will reign.

John's vision reaches its climax. <sup>5</sup> *He who was seated on the throne [Jesus] said, "I am making everything new!"*

Here again is a parallel. Isaiah wrote (43:18-19): <sup>18</sup> *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. <sup>19</sup> See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."*

In his vision, John hears the words from Jesus. It is clear to him that Jesus is the one who provides and makes available the newness that is promised. The promise, therefore, is to everyone who follows Jesus and has a vital connection of life with him.

*"I am making everything new!"* This is the essence of Christian hope, particularly when we attend a funeral of a Christian. The promise of newness touches us deeply as we witness the deaths of loved ones. Perhaps they have seen the pain, the scarring, the result of accidents. They will be made new and whole. Perhaps they have known the ravages of disease. They will be made new and whole. Perhaps they experienced the degradation of dementia. They will be made new and whole. Perhaps they dealt with the devastation of physical aging, losing abilities, wasting away. They will be made new and whole.

The Scriptures relating to Jesus indicate that there will only be one single remaining evidence of pain and scarring in the life of the resurrection. That will be the prints of the nails in the hands and feet of Jesus and of the spear in his side. These are the scars that made our newness possible, the trophies of love.

<sup>6</sup> *He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."*

Again, John echoes Isaiah (44:6) *"This is what the Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."*

Jesus, in John's vision, says the same thing, using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the beginning and the end; he is the source and the completion. The writer to the Hebrews calls him "*the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" (12:3)

In the vision, Jesus continues. He says, "*To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.*"

Another renewed promise.

Isaiah had written (55:1-3), "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. <sup>2</sup> Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. <sup>3</sup> Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*"

John's vision is confirmed in the writings of the prophets. Nothing is added. The promises of God, first declared by the prophets, are confirmed in the revelation John received and in the words of the resurrected Jesus.

And the rest of our reading: *<sup>7</sup> Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*"

Who are these victorious people?

Paul writes, "*Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (1 Corinthians 15:57)

The victory we look for is the gift of God in the sacrifice of Jesus.

John writes, "*In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, <sup>4</sup> for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*" (1 John 4:3-5)

We are back to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. He got it all started; he continues with us on the way, and he is there at the end of it all.

We may not know for sure what awaits those who do **not** trust in Jesus, but the promises made to those who do put their trust in him are clear messages of hope and well worth our notice.