

The Final Immanuel

Revelation 21:1-4

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As we enter the last two chapters of Revelation, we will be hearing a lot from C. S. Lewis, who understood these two chapters perhaps better than anyone else in history, with the possible exception of the Apostle John himself. One of the reiterating themes throughout the Chronicles of Narnia is that the children keep getting separated from Aslan just when they thought they might be able to stay with him forever. Sure, Aslan tells them on occasion that He is known by a different name in our world (Jesus Christ!), still, it is difficult to part with Aslan for all the children. The same is true of the church. The church had Jesus Christ with her on earth for a short time. Then Jesus went away, and the church was sad. Even there, however, Jesus did not abandon His bride. He promised and delivered the “other Comforter,” the Holy Spirit, and thus fulfilled His promise to be with His church even to the very end of the age. Even with that promise, however, the church misses her Bridegroom. The church wants to be with the bridegroom, as every bride wants to be with her husband. What we see in our passage this morning is the joyous reunion. It is a reunion never to be broken again. God will never separate Himself from His people ever again. God will truly be with us. God will be our Immanuel forevermore. The final Immanuel means three things for us, as given to us in the passage: 1. the setting is perfect, 2. the bride is perfect, 3. the bride is happy.

Firstly, we see that the setting is perfect. As we saw last week, the old heavens and the old earth fled away before God, who is the judge. But now a new heavens and a new earth come into being. How much will it be like our current heavens and earth, and how different will it be? Theologians have wrestled with this question for a long time. Here in Revelation 21, the word used here for “new” means, in this context, something qualitatively different from the old thing. It doesn't just mean something recent. Here it is contrasted with the old heavens and the old earth. The contrast is between the first heaven and the first earth, and the last heaven and the last earth. But that still doesn't settle the question of much alike or different they will be. There are some

passages that seem to indicate that the new heavens and new earth won't be anything like what we see now. Peter tells us that this world is reserved for fire, and that fire will burn up our world before God can build a new one. That seems to suggest something very different in the future. Other passages seem to suggest more of a renewal. In this chapter, verse 5, for instance, God says that He is making all things new. My best guess is that there will be ways in which the two are similar, and ways in which they are different. It is fruitless to try to parse out precisely just what that will look like.

I believe also that the question should be reversed. Instead of asking how much like this world will the new world be, we should be asking how much like the new world is this world. Again C.S. Lewis helps us here. He used to call this world the Shadowlands. In the Last Battle, the white unicorn Jewel, who was the best companion of the last king of Narnia, King Tirian, arrives in the new Narnia, and says these words: "I have come home at last! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this." You see, everything that is good in this world will be perfect in the next. Nothing that is bad will remain. All evil and ugliness will vanish.

We know this because John tells us that the sea will be no more. The sea was the symbol of everything chaotic, everything evil, everything opposed to God. It is the place from which the first beast comes in chapter 12. The people in John's time feared the sea. Remember also that the sea separated John from his beloved churches. What comfort would it have been to John to know that his banishment to the island of Patmos was only temporary, because one day Patmos would no longer be an island! Doug Kelly tells a story about something that happened to him long ago when he was about to leave a church in Scotland in order to come over to the United States. He was having tea with two elderly ladies, and saying farewell to them, neither of whom wanted him to go. Then one of them said to Kelly that she was comforted very much by having read that very morning in Revelation that one day there will be no more sea. So the sea can also represent the things that separate us from our loved ones.

A lot of people don't want to see the new heavens and the new earth because they like this world too much. What we learn here is that such people are settling for something that is far inferior to what is coming. A decent analogy can be found in the world of electronics. When a new electronic item first comes out, it has a lot of problems with it, usually, and it is very expensive. If you wait until newer versions come out, the developers have usually worked out a lot of the bugs, and the technology becomes cheaper as well. Why settle for this world with all of its problems? Why set our hearts on it, when we can have the new heavens and the new earth, a perfect setting?

In the perfect setting belongs the perfect bride. This is the second thing we see in the new heavens and the new earth. This text may well be the most important passage in all of Scripture for understanding the true nature of the church. For what is the foremost objection that people raise against joining the church? Its many imperfections! They see the warts, bruises, sickness, infections, heresies, and cold-hearted hypocrites, and they think, "I don't want to join them. They're no better than they ought to be, and certainly not better than me." This is an incorrect view of the church. Or, should I say, it is an incomplete view of the church. Yes, the church has many problems today. All of these things are true of the church. However, there are two things about the church that we learn from Revelation 21. The first thing is that God is not going to leave the church like it is now. In fact, God is purifying and cleansing the church constantly with the washing of water and the Word. It is important to notice that it is God who is doing the preparation. In verse 2, we see that the bride is beautifully prepared for her husband. The language here is clear that the bride is not the one primarily doing the preparation. In this way, the new Jerusalem is unlike most brides. Most brides get themselves ready on the day of the wedding, or they have a few people helping. But here we have another one of those divine passive constructions. The bride is beautifully prepared BY her Husband, and FOR her Husband.

It is only as the setting is perfect and the bride is perfect that God can completely remove all things that interfere with perfect communion. The perfect God cannot have fullest communion with a church that is imperfect. Nor will God have such communion in a

setting that is imperfect. So, God removes all imperfections, remaking the whole cosmos, and remaking the church, all so that He can have the closest possible relationship with the church for all eternity. The dwelling of God will be with His people forevermore. At the end of verse 3, we find the last restatement of the covenant principle: God will be our God, and we will be His people. All through the Old Testament, this statement repeats like a refrain. It identifies the two parties to the covenant of grace: God and the church.

All of this happens through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and in no other way could it happen. In order to cleanse His church, He came to earth in the first Immanuel. Now that all of that work is finished here in Revelation, He comes back as the final Immanuel to dwell with His people, never to be parted from them again.

This eternal dwelling of God with His people means the perfect happiness of the bride, as we see in verse 4, surely one of the most beautiful promises in all of Scripture: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” The former things are the things associated with death, and through death, the cause of death, which is sin. God being with His people means that there can be no imperfection, which means no more sin. And if there is no more sin, then there will be nothing left in the new heavens and new earth to cause pain, sorrow, mourning, or death. So sum up the three main points and to show how they are connected becomes easy: God perfects the setting (also known as “home”), God perfects the bride, and the result is complete and utter bliss for God's people. But what will that look like and why should we want it?

Some of us in this church are fortunate enough right now to be reading through Randy Alcorn's book on Heaven. This is a very important book, and a very helpful book, because he shows why it is that so many people have wrong views of what Heaven is going to be like. For instance, lots of people think that Heaven is going to be us sitting on clouds with a wispy body (or maybe no body at all!) playing harps all day long for eternity. And to that, many people say, “If that's what Heaven is going to be like, then I don't want it.” Fortunately, such ideas are based primarily on the ideas of Plato, and not that of the

Bible. As Randy Alcorn points out over and over again from Scripture after Scripture, Heaven and earth will be a bit more like what we know now, except far better. Imagine, for instance, being able to create something effortlessly, and without pain and agony. Imagine working on something and being to do what you want perfectly and without any frustration whatsoever. Imagine being able to go where you want to go, and do what you want to do without effort, without cost, without pain, and (my personal favorite!), without fatigue. Remember what Jewel said? “The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.” We will say the same thing in the new heavens and the new earth. There is every reason in the world to long for it to come soon. Some people go too far in that longing and decide to take their own lives to get there faster. On the one hand, I'm sure that there are people in heaven who have taken their own lives. Whether you are sinning when you die or not is not the key factor in determining your ultimate destination. However, God commands us to leave life and death in His hands. There are always reasons that God has us alive right now. It is much better to find out what those reasons are, and then fulfill God's call on our lives, while still recognizing that longing for something better.

We should also appreciate those glimpses that we have of what the new heavens and the new earth will be like. The worship service should give us such a glimpse. The Lord's Supper is another such glimpse. Sometimes the beauty of heaven can grasp our hearts and minds through the Word as well. One of my friends in South Dakota was fond of saying to me, in the days leading up to preaching, “Give 'em Heaven!” That can happen through the preaching of the Word. There are events in our lives that can help us to think about Heaven in the right way. My father used to tell me on occasion, and I think he was right, that marital intimacy can also give us such a glimpse. All of these things together can help us develop a longing for Heaven, and a less clinging attitude towards the things of this world. For when God makes the setting and the bride perfect, then, and only then will she live happily ever after.