

Last Things First  
Revelation 22:1-5  
2/21/2016

Can you ever go home? Thomas Wolfe says no. The title of his book is, "You Can't Go Home Again." In that novel, a writer writes a book about his small home town. However, when he goes back to that town, he finds out that the people hate him for writing that book, since they feel exposed. He is driven out, and winds up going to France and Germany during the time of Hitler. Finally, at the end of the book, he comes back to America, and there is both sorrow and hope at his coming back to America. But it isn't the same America. Here is the important line of the book: "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." This powerful kind of longing is expressed in a somewhat more light-hearted way by the old quip, "They say that nostalgia just isn't what it used to be." The entire human race wants to go back home, even though many people don't see that very clearly. They don't remember what home is, or they seek for a home in all the wrong places. Humanity's true home has always been the Garden of Eden, the garden, which is also a temple, and the place where God meets with man. Fair warning: this passage is incredibly densely packed, because so many threads of biblical revelation that have many pearls on those strings, get tied up here, and so this sermon will be densely packed as well. This passage, in fact, is the end of the main middle part of Revelation. The rest of Revelation 22 is exhortation based on what John has seen.

Well, can we ever get back home? Yes we can. However, it won't be like the Garden of Eden was. Instead, when we get there, we will find that it is far better than the original. We can't go home again if we think we can go back to the original Garden of Eden. That place was blocked by two cherubim waving their swords and guarding the way back. Those two cherubim were always been guarding the way back to the Garden in the time of the Old Testament. We find them in the Ark of the Covenant. They were saying "Don't get too close!" They reappear in the tabernacle and the temple. When we were looking at the tabernacle in our studies of Exodus, you might remember that we traced the theme of the two angels guarding the way, and the ark of the covenant, until we see empty tomb. John describes it as a new Most Holy Place. There were two angels there, one at the head and one at the foot. That detail in John 20 is meant to point out the fact that Christ is the reality to which the ark of the covenant always pointed forward. The empty tomb and resurrection means purification. That is why the two angels in the tomb of Jesus meant the exact opposite of what they had always meant in

the past. In the past, the angels meant “keep out, and don't come any closer!” Now, the two angels mean, “Come in, and welcome.” Since the veil of the temple was torn in two at the death of Christ, the way is now open, not shut. The way back home is open, only it is a way forward to a new home, which is better in every way than Eden, even though it will always remind us of Eden. Last things first. The Garden of Eden always pointed forward to the New Heavens and the New Earth. In our text, we see five ways that the the newer is better, while still reminding us of the old.

The first is the river. In Genesis 2, we hear of a river that flowed out of Eden to water the garden. It splits into four rivers: the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. Giving water means that it gives life. If we remember that Eden is the temple 1.0, it becomes odd that the river flows *out of* the temple. In most cities, for instance, water had to be drawn into the city somehow. The Roman aqueducts were famous examples of engineering whereby the Romans brought water into the city from places sometimes far away. But in the Garden of Eden, and in the temple of Ezekiel, and in the new heavens and new earth, the pattern is exactly the reverse. The water and refreshment comes out of the place where God and man meet. It does not flow to it. In Ezekiel 47, Ezekiel sees water flowing from below the threshold of the temple. Its purpose is easy to see. For in Ezekiel 47:12, we see that the river nourishes the tree of life so that the tree bears fruit every month of the year. Then, in Zechariah 14:8, we see living waters will flow from Jerusalem, half to the east and half to the west. Climactically, in John 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that if she drinks from the water that Jesus will give her, then wells of living water will well up in them to everlasting life. This flowing water usually represents the Holy Spirit in the Bible. For, in John 3, Jesus says of Nicodemus that a man must be born of water and the Spirit. Water and Spirit are closely connected there. And by tapping into the inexhaustible sources of spiritual refreshment that the Holy Spirit has to offer, we ourselves become sources of fresh water for other people.

Have we been nourished by the Holy Spirit? Have we been born again? Do we have that river of life flowing through, welling up into everlasting life? Do we acknowledge that source as coming from God, and not from inside us? We are more like the Roman cities, aren't we? We need the water to come from outside us into us, just like drinking water. That is because we are not sources of life and refreshment in and of ourselves. Recognizing where that source comes from is exceptionally important in the Christian walk.

As we saw in Ezekiel, the river nourishes the tree of life. The tree of life is the second way in which the new heavens and new earth form a newer, better Eden for us. The tree of life is obviously a reference to the Garden of Eden, and the tree of life that was there. The tree of life is represented in the tabernacle and the temple by the seven-branched candlestick, the Menorah. It gives life and light

to the world. It is the reason why John, in the first chapter of his gospel, so tightly connects together life and light. John 1:4 says this, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Jesus is the light of the world. He is the Tree of Life. By coming into the world, He made the fruit of salvation available to us. The book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom is like a tree of life. And Psalm 1 tells us that the man who reads, meditates, and internalizes the Word of God in his heart will be like a tree planted by streams of living waters, exactly what we find as the end product right here in Revelation 22.

The tree that John sees is a fascinating combination of Genesis and Ezekiel. In Genesis, of course, there is only one tree. In Ezekiel 47, there are many trees, planted by either side of the river that comes from the temple. John combines both these ideas in a seemingly strange way. He talks about seeing only one tree. But this tree has strange aspects about it. It can grow on both sides of the river, like Ezekiel's many trees, and it can bear its fruit year-round. What is going on here? It seems clear that John is trying very hard to make sure that you connect the Tree of Life from Genesis with the trees that Ezekiel is talking about in chapter 47. So, he takes the fact that there is one tree from Genesis 2, and then he takes the idea of fruit-bearing and being on both sides of the river from Ezekiel, and melds them into a new fascinating and almost unimaginable tree. What will it look like? Who knows! The point that John is making is that it will give life because it is fed from the ever-flowing stream. It will heal the nations, as Ezekiel says in chapter 47, and as John says here in verse 2. This does not mean that any nations will need healing after God makes the new heavens and new earth. It means that all nations will be healed, period. Echoes of the swords being beat into plowshares from Isaiah come to mind here, and not learning war anymore, because the knowledge of the Lord God will cover the face of the earth as the waters cover the seas.

Do you not want to eat from that tree? To eat of it in the future means that we need to hunger and thirst for righteousness now. Jesus' promise in the Beatitudes is that such hungry and thirsty people will be filled. They will receive all the food they need from the tree of life, just as they will receive all the refreshment they need from the river of life that flows from the throne of God. Desire the righteousness of God. Obtain by faith the righteousness of Christ, and then work to make better (always in the Spirit's power) the righteousness of sanctification. Be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. It is more important than where your next meal is coming from!

This leads us into the third way that the new heavens and new earth are better than Eden: there will be no more curse. Do not miss the gigantic, even cosmic scale, on which John is speaking here. The curse brought on the entire universe by our sin will be no more. The curse that God Himself brought in judgment upon Adam and Eve for being disobedient will be gone. What were the

ways that curse affected the universe? The most important thing was death itself. Death entered the world through the sin of Adam. Death was promised to Adam and Eve upon disobedience. Furthermore, the ground was cursed so that farming the land would become so much more difficult. The woman was cursed in child-bearing so that great pain would result. All the pain, sorrow, death, sickness, war, famine, fatigue, depression and everything else bad in this world has come through the curse, which we earned through Adam's sin. By the way, this means that we can't blame God for the presence of sin in the world. We brought it upon ourselves. Bad things happen because we invited them to happen. God didn't slip on His throne. He has a plan for dealing with the problem, and here in Revelation 22 we see that plan come to final fruition (literally!).

The problem with the original Garden was, that while it was free from sin, sin could still enter through Satan tempting Adam and Eve. What will be true of the new heavens and the new earth is that evil will never, ever, have a chance to tempt anyone ever again. So, it will be both perfect, and unchangeably perfect.

In the meanwhile, we can work against the curse even today. Every time we share the gospel with family or friends, we are working to overcome the curse. Every time doctors seek to enable healing in someone, they are working to overcome the curse. Every time we seek to make the world a more beautiful place, we are seeking to overcome the curse. The applications are endless.

The reason our text gives for why there will be no curse is that the throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and worship will be perfect. The throne of God is the place where God reigns. Notice that it is one single throne one which both the Father and the Son sit. The Father and the Son together on one throne. As we know, nothing evil can come into the presence of God without being burned to a crisp. That is why there is a veil between heaven and earth right now. It is actually for our protection. If, in our current sinful state, we were to come into the presence of God with no veil, we would be burned up. As the Old Testament says, no one can see God and live.

That leads us to our fourth way in which the new heavens and new earth are better. The fourth way it is better is we actually will be able to see the face of God! The Old Testament says no one may do this and live. But we have to add an additional word in there to understand it properly: no *sinful* person may see God and live. However, people who have been perfect through death and resurrection, and are therefore without sin, need no further protect, for the holiness of God, which is a consuming fire, will have nothing to consume, because we will be just as sinless as God Himself is. No further protection will be required. Even in the Garden of Eden, we never read of Adam and Eve seeing God face to face. Moses, though desiring to see God's glory, was only allowed to see the "backside" of God, and his face shone like a beacon for quite a while afterwards.

To look on the face of God, that is something that we undervalue at the

moment, because we really don't have any idea what that is going to be like. And, we also have to admit, the idea is a somewhat scary one. But the Bible presents it as the most exciting thing that could ever happen to anyone. Moses wanted it above all. Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." So Jesus calls it a great blessing to see God. John also says in his first letter: "It has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." This means that the very act of seeing Him will forever transform us into creatures that are as like to God as any creature could possibly be. We can only see Him now by faith, and that has to be enough for us.

God's name will be on our foreheads. This means that we belong to Him, and are marked as His people, just as we might put our name on something to let people know to whom the thing belongs. But it also means that we will be priests. For the priests of the Old Testament were said to have the names of God's people written on their foreheads. That is the reason why the worship of God will be perfect, as the end of verse 3 implies. All God's people will be perfect.

The fifth way the new heavens and new earth will be better than Eden is that there will be no night there, and no sun or moon, because the Lord God is the lamp. We looked at this somewhat last week. I want to add a slightly different angle on this discussion by noticing something wondrous about God, light, and the sun and moon. Genesis 1 makes a point of saying that the sun, moon, and stars did not come into existence until the fourth day of creation. And yet the creation of light itself happened on the first day of creation. So, light existed before the sun, moon, and stars at the beginning of creation. At the end of creation, it will be mirror image. There will be no sun, moon, or stars, because the Lord God Himself will be all the light we will ever need. It is an exact reversal. But in this way, the end is better than the beginning. In the beginning, one of the first things God did with the light was to separate it from darkness into time periods that alternate between light and dark: our days and nights. In the new heavens and new earth, God removes the separation from light and dark, and because the light is so much more powerful, it completely overcomes the darkness. Echoes of the first chapter of John are present here as well. John says that the light came into the world and the darkness has not overcome it. The darkness will never overcome the light. The light will overcome the darkness.

So, can we go home? Yes, a beautiful home is waiting for us in the new heavens and the new earth. We can't go back to the old Eden. However, when we see how much the glories of the new heavens and new earth dwarf the beauty of the old Eden, why would we want to get back to the old Eden? Let us press forward towards the new Eden, the better Eden, the Final Eden.