

We have been going through the book of Revelation this fall. Revelation was written by John and was intended primarily for 1st century Christians, to encourage them as they underwent intense persecution and suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire. Remember that Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and that continues in this passage. John sees literal visions full of things that are meant to be taken symbolically. As of last week, evil has finally been destroyed, and this morning and next week we'll be looking at the last two chapters of the Bible that tell us where history is heading. Preaching through the whole book of Revelation, there has been so much suffering and judgment and evil and then finally it is gone and all that is left is us and God. Let's read Revelation 21:1 – 22:5:

Revelation 21:1-22:5 - *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. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 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." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." ⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ¹⁵ The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶ The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. ¹⁷ He*

measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. ¹⁸ The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, ²⁰ the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. ²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. **Revelation 22:1-5** Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ 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 will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

There is a lot to talk about in these two passages. Some of it I will leave for next Sunday. **For today, I want to focus on two aspects: what is meant by the new heavens and new earth, and what is meant by the wedding imagery.**

In this passage, John receives a vision of what the eternal state will be like, the new heavens and new earth. This may be a new concept to some of you. Certainly there is a lot of confusion and misconception about heaven, even in the church. For example, take a children's book by that noted theologian Maria Shriver, called "What's Heaven?":

Heaven "is somewhere you believe in... It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe... If you're good

throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven... When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him... ”

Even though this is written for children and pretty simplistic, you can hear some popular conceptions of heaven – it’s up there, there’s something magical and otherworldly about it, it’s where God is, and it’s where you go when you die if you’re good.

Or, for those of you who are old enough to remember, think of the depictions of heaven in Far Side cartoons.

I think if you asked the average Christian what happens when you die, they would say “you live in heaven with God forever.” If you ask the average evangelical Christian what happens when you die, they would tell you something like this: “well, there are basically two options: **heaven and hell. God created us to have a relationship with him, but we sinned, and now we’re separated from God. Those who come to faith in Christ Jesus will live for God with eternity in heaven, and those who do not will experience eternal torment in Hell. Heaven is up there, a disembodied existence in the presence of God. The body dies, the earth is no more, but our souls are up there forever with God, worshiping Him and enjoying his presence, being reunited with our loved ones, and living in mansions with streets of gold.**”

But as you can see from Revelation 21-22, there is so much more to heaven and to our lives after death. **So what is heaven? Let me share two things.** We get our first clue from the Lord’s prayer:

Matthew 6:9-13 - *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your **kingdom** come, your will be done on earth as it is in **heaven**. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'*

From this prayer, we learn that heaven is where God dwells, and where His will is done. It is not simply a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of our **ordinary life**. Humans do not see it, except on rare occasions (Stephen in Acts 7:55, Elisha in 2 Kings 6, John in Revelation 4-5).

Secondly, heaven is a temporary place of rest and tranquility for believers on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body. **John 14:1-3** - *"Do not let your hearts*

be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am

There are many dwelling places – the Greek word is “mone” – a temporary lodging on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run (not KJV “mansions”). Think as well of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43 - today you will be with me in paradise. Paradise is the blissful garden of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day, the renewal of all things.

But that is not the end. **It ends with God dwelling with resurrected believers. Heaven comes down to earth, and the dwelling of God is with men. A renewed earth that has been joined with heaven. New is “kainos” – newness in terms of quality; not “neos”, which is new in terms of time.**

Anthony Hoekema – “The new Jerusalem does not remain in a heaven far off in space, but it comes down to the renewed earth; there the redeemed will spend eternity in resurrection bodies. So heaven and earth, now separated, will then be merged: the new earth will also be heaven, since God will dwell there with his people. Glorified believers in other words, will continue to be in heaven while they are inhabiting the new earth.

We will live for eternity in renewed, perfected bodies on a renewed, perfected earth, with God, and with all evil and suffering destroyed and done away with. **And the main metaphor used for this union in Revelation 21 is of a wedding.** Eternity is described by using wedding imagery. It is the wedding of the Lamb, and the bride has made herself ready. The bride is the people of God. The people of God are described collectively (not individually) as the bride of Christ, and on the last day, as we come into eternity, the occasion is described as a wedding. What does this all mean?

I want to take you through the Bible to find clues as to what this all means.

1) Earthly marriage is temporary, a sign pointing to a greater reality

The first clue to what it means comes from Matthew 22. In this chapter, a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death, ask Jesus a question in hopes of exposing how ridiculous views on the afterlife are:

Matthew 22:24-33 - Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. ²⁷ Finally, the woman died. ²⁸ Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

Interesting question, which I'm sure people have thought of. **If I've been married a couple of times, how awkward is that going to be in heaven?** Am I going to be a polygamist in heaven? **And if heaven contains all good things, will there be sex in heaven?** Let's look at how Jesus responds to the Sadducees:

²⁹ Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ³¹ But about the resurrection of the dead-- have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." ³³ When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

Notice how Jesus responds. In heaven, there will be no marriage. There will be no sex. They will not be necessary. **Jesus responds by saying that if you think there is marriage in heaven, you don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God – you don't realize that there is something greater in store.** Maybe some of you are familiar with the Mormon teaching about how we are married for all eternity. Jesus exposes that to be a false teaching. If you are married, you and your wife will no longer be husband and wife in heaven; the long-lost reunion with your departed spouse that is so popular in culture may not be exactly as you envision in your head when you arrive in heaven. Not that you won't be reunited, but Jesus is saying that the joy of marital oneness that you experience on earth will be nothing compared to what you will be experiencing in eternity, in the presence of God. That's worth considering for a second. **As great as marriage, companionship, sex, and raising children can be on earth, Jesus says that you won't even be thinking about those things once you are in the presence of God, because there's something there that will be so much greater than even the best married life here on earth.**

CS Lewis put it this way, when asked about sex in heaven: *"I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at*

the same time. On receiving the answer, "No," he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don't bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate; he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it."

Our first clue about why the Bible uses wedding imagery to explain heaven is this: **In heaven, we will no longer be married or have sex, because both of those are signs pointing to a greater reality, and once we have that reality, we no longer need the signs.** So what is Christian marriage, and what is it a picture of? What is it a window into? **What is the greater reality to which the sign of Christian marriage is suppose to point?**

2) Christian marriage is meant to be a sign pointing to Christ's relationship with His people

The second clue is found in Ephesians 5:21-33. If you read the Bible closely, the clues to what marriage points to are everywhere. Let's read Ephesians 5:21-33:

Ephesians 5:21 - 33 - *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

Look at how many times Paul compares the relationship between the husband and wife to the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church. Apparently to Paul, a marriage is more than just a marriage. In some mystical way, marriage is

supposed to be an earthly picture of God's love for his people. In the ideal marriage, the way a husband and wife complement each other and relate to each other should be a witness to the world about God's love for his people.

As you read through the rest of the Bible, you find that Paul was not just making this analogy up. In fact, what you find is that wedding and marriage language is used often to illustrate God's relationship to his people.

For instance, look at the prophetic books, such as **Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea**. Remember that after the Israelites were rescued from Egypt, they were given the law, including the Ten Commandments and many other laws. At Mt. Siani, God make a **covenant** with his people, that He would be their God and they would be His people, and the laws were the stipulations by which that relationship would work. But of course, God's people broke the covenant often. In order to confront His people and call them back to Him, God would send prophets to communicate this message to the people. When you read the prophetic books, you find that **one popular way God communicated this breaking of the covenant was using language of marriage and adultery**. For example, listen to a passage from Isaiah:

***Isaiah 62:4-5** - No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his **bride**, so will your God*

And nowhere is the imagery of marriage and adultery more obvious than in the book of Hosea. In that prophetic book, God tells a prophet named Hosea to take a prostitute for a wife as a picture to the people of God of how they have treated God Himself:

***Hosea 1:2** - When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD."*

In chapter 2, however, God instructs Hosea to take his wife back and love her, because that is what he will do to His people, despite the fact that they have cheated on Him with other gods.

***Hosea 2:14-20** - "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ There I will give her back her vineyards, and*

will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. ¹⁶ "In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.'" ¹⁷ I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. ¹⁸ In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. ¹⁹ I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. ²⁰ I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.

God says that in a way, his relationship with his people is like that of a groom and bride, and when his people reject him to serve something else, it is not just breaking a law, but is like committing adultery. Sin is not just rule-breaking; it is loving anything more than we love God.

3) In the new heavens and the new earth, we will have the love, intimacy, joy, and security we have longed for in earthly marriage

In Jesus' parables, the language of bride and groom comes out often as well. For the careful reader, the marriage and wedding imagery is all over his teaching. Let me give you a little background on marriage in Jesus' day, because I think it will shed more light on what I'm saying. In Jesus' time, **families lived in clusters of buildings called insulas**, which were built around a central courtyard, and immediate and extended families all live together in the insula. When a son was old enough to get married, **he and his family would find a girl that he was interested in marrying**. Remember that there was a bride price, a dowry, that would be paid in exchange for the young woman's hand in marriage (remember also that the girls were usually about 13 or 14). If the fathers agreed on the terms of the marriage, there would be a celebration to announce their engagement. At this celebration, **the groom would offer the young girl a cup of wine to drink as a proposal to marriage, symbolizing that he wants to make a covenant with her and that he'd be willing to give his life for her**. Even though the parents had agreed on the terms, the young woman still had the right to refuse his offer of marriage by not drinking the wine. But if she wanted to accept, then she would drink the wine. If she drank the wine, then the groom would give a speech about their future together. And then the bridegroom would go back home and build an addition onto the insula, the family home. The father would then inspect the home, looking to see if it properly honors his future bride. And when his father declared that the building was complete and done well, then he could bring her home and marry her.

Once the bridegroom had the Father's okay, he would gather his friends and head out to find his bride-to-be. Remember that she has been home in her family's insula, preparing herself for the bridegroom's return, which will happen whenever he finishes preparing a place for them to live. **The bride-to-be, in order to let the bridegroom know where to find her, would fill a lamp with oil and set it in her window every night**, so that when he comes, he would know which room in the insula is hers. And so the bridegroom would come to the bride's town and blow the shofar or trumpet to let the bride know that her wedding day had come. He would find look for the oil lamp, find his bride, and they would gather their friends and family and process back to his house, where they would consummate the marriage and then begin the weeklong celebration.

Maybe you're already hearing some of the allusions to the way Jesus talks about His people and specifically His second coming. Remember the speech that the bridegroom gives to the bride-to-be about their future together? The typical speech goes something like this: *"My father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare and place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."*

Does this sound familiar? Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:1-6:

John 14:1-6 - *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

How beautiful is that? Jesus is echoing what was communicated in the Old Testament prophets, and what will be echoed by Paul. He is using the imagery of marriage and a wedding in order to communicate to his followers the depth of God's love and commitment for his people. Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in the insula of heaven, where the family of God will live with the eternal Father. And He tells them that He will come back for us, to take us away to be with Him forever. Isn't that amazing? And I think that

understanding Jewish weddings of Jesus' day adds more understanding to other passages about his Second Coming as well, such as **Matthew 25:1-13**, the parable of the ten virgins who took their lamps to wait for the bridegroom, **Matthew 24:36**, where Jesus says that only the Father knows the timing of the Second Coming, just as only the earthly father would know when the new rooms would be ready, and the references to the trumpet signaling the second coming in **1 Corinthians 15** and **1 Thessalonians 4**.

Why is there so much wedding language when heaven is discussed? Think about it this way: **what language would you use to describe the love, the intimacy, the joy, the security, the celebration found in an eternal relationship with God?** Wedding language is the best language we have on earth to communicate the depth of love, commitment, joy, security, and ecstasy that is found in a relationship with God, both now and eternally. Marriage and sex are meant to provide a place of escape from the pain and suffering and brokenness of the world. But what happens when there is no more pain in the world? At the end of time, the writer of Revelation describes eternity as a wedding, the coming together of the bridegroom, Jesus, and his bride, the church. **Out of all the possible imagery that could have been used to describe heaven, God chose a wedding, the beginning of an eternal union.** By using this language, the writer of Revelation is communicating that eternity will be the perfect union between God and his people, where we enter into His eternal love, security, and joy forever. Our time in the new heavens and new earth are going to be one long celebration of this love and union.

What does this mean for us today?

1) Marriage is not the ultimate answer to your longing for love

And your spouse, ex-spouse, or spouse to be is not the ultimate answer to your longing for companionship, security, love, joy, and ecstasy. Your marriage, your desire for marriage, or your lack of a marriage, is a sign pointing to the greater reality of a relationship with Christ, that you can begin to have now and will continue for all eternity. Do not idolize your spouse or marriage – our relationship with Christ is what completes us. Your spouse can not be your salvation, your strength. In fact, the Bible is very high on singlehood. Consider how Jonathan Edwards put this truth:

“God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here.

Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”

2) **Christian marriage is meant to be a witness to the world**

Our imperfect earthly marriages are supposed to be a window that allows people to see God’s deep love for his people. Marriage is not primarily about happiness or raising kids, but about giving the world a picture of Christ’s love for the church. When a bride and groom come together in marriage, it is a picture of what will happen in eternity, when we enter into a perfect union of love and bliss. Weddings are supposed to bring us hope, the hope of what is possible, how love can conquer fear and loneliness and past hurt. But while our imperfect marriages rarely do that completely, one day we will finally experience a love that will drive out all fear, eradicate all loneliness, and wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will not need marriage in heaven, because in eternity, we will have the real thing. Practice forgiveness and grace, and in doing so you will give the world a glimpse of God’s love for us.

3) **Thirdly, purify yourself like a bride for her husband**

Think about his appearing as a wedding. How long does it take you to get ready on a Saturday? For work? For church? For your wedding? Why? We prepare because the day is so important, and we want to look spotless. John writes in **1 John 3:2-3** - *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* ³ *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.* Purify yourself for that day. Get to know Him now, and prepare yourself to be joined to your groom. Only have eyes for Him.

4) **Finally, the Christian faith is not a religion, but is an intimate relationship with God.**

The end of all things is like a wedding – the inauguration of the most intimate of relationships. Everything you’ve been looking for in another human being is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. And the one thing that can’t be found there – sex & marriage – will pale in comparison to the ecstasy of knowing Him in eternity.

Let me close with the words of JI Packer:

JI Packer – “Hearts on earth may say in the course of a joyful experience, “I don’t want this ever to end.” But invariably it does. The hearts of those in heaven say, “I want this to go on forever.” And it will. There is no better news than this