

5. iFace: the Gospel, the future and true relationship

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[0 : 00] I'd be very glad if you'd turn in your Bible to Revelation chapter 21. We're going to read this passage and we'll be considering this this evening. Revelation 21, right at the end of your Bibles.

We're looking forwards to the future this evening, to the great end of things, beginning of new things, that the Lord Jesus Christ has won by his victory.

I'm going to read the whole of the chapter. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

[1 : 15] Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I'm making all things new.

Also, he said, write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. And he said to me, it is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage. And I will be his God and he will be my son.

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

[2 : 21] And he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal.

It had a great high wall with twelve gates and at the gates twelve angels. And on the gates, the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. On the east, three gates.

On the north, three gates. On the south, three gates. And on the west, three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations. And on them were then twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies four square. Its length the same as its width.

And he measured the city with his rod. Twelve thousand stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall. A hundred and forty four cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement.

[3 : 29] The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

And the twelve gates were twelve pearls. Each of the gates made of a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb.

By its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. And its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations, but nothing unclean will ever enter it.

Not anyone nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. This is the word of the Lord. We praise him for it.

[4 : 51] Let's pray as we come to God's word. Let's pray. We thank you, Heavenly Father, that there is a day coming when we will know you, fear you, love you, serve you rightly.

And we pray that you would help us to look forward to that day this evening with anticipation and with joy, with gratitude.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well now, over these last few weeks, if you've been with us, you'll know that we've been thinking about life online.

How the gospel relates to the online world that so many of us inhabit so much of the time. This week we're finishing that series off and we're going to be stepping back a bit from the detail and trying to get a slightly broader perspective on this subject.

One of the main things I think we've found over these last few weeks is that though the technology is new, it certainly is, and developing all the time, the issues you deal with online are really nothing new at all.

[6 : 02] In fact, they're as old as humanity is. What we find in the online world is a mass of contrast and contradiction, cleverness and folly, relational possibilities and superficiality in relationship, promise and failure, brilliance and shame.

These are human contradictions. These contrasts are human contrasts. What we see online is ourselves, our humanity.

Yes, it's a bit of a caricature of humanity because most of online relating is not face-to-face and therefore there are things that we lose in relationship. We lose the subtlety and clarity of face-to-face relationship.

We lose some of the inhibitions and difficulties of face-to-face relationship. We also lose some of the helpful restraint that being face-to-face with people provides.

And so the image that we find of ourselves online is humanity with the contrast knob turned up maximum. The blacks are blacker. The whites are whiter. Humanity with the volume turned up.

[7 : 16] Humanity painted in primary colors. But it's still regular humanity that we see online. And I think two things have stood out for me in the online world.

First, our frustrated longing for significance. It's there all over the place. We long for something about us to last.

To leave our mark on the world. And yet online, so much of the massive data out there, all of it produced by human beings, our thoughts, opinions, research, creativity, so much of it is either second-hand or useless or destructive or, worst of all, perhaps, just ignored.

Last forever? It certainly won't. The second thing that's most obvious is our frustrated longing for relationship. We long to know and to be known.

And yet online, though sometimes the level of disclosure that people give is sometimes striking, at the same time, so much relating is superficial and so much is deceptive.

[8 : 30] Online, we long to be known, and yet we hide very effectively the things we don't want to be seen. So we can't really be known as we are, which is what we long for.

The online life reveals our deepest longings and our greatest failures at one and the same time. And it's with that in mind that this evening we're turning to the end of things.

In the end, will there be anything significant about us human beings? Or is that all just wishful thinking? In the end, will there ever be real, deep, open, unspoiled relationship?

Or did all that fly out the window forever in Eden? Is all we do and all our effort in this age doomed to failure?

Does death have the last word on all our busyness, on all our brilliance, on all our loves and relationships? Well, with that in mind, please turn to Revelation chapter 21.

[9 : 38] It's at the end of your Bible and it speaks about the end of this age and the beginning of a new one. The book of Revelation is a communication from the Lord Jesus Christ to his churches.

It's written to struggling churches. To wake them up to the way things really are behind the scenes in God's world. And to remind them that though it doesn't look like it, God is really in control in his world.

The difficulties that these churches are going through are not beyond God's reach. The sins that they're indulging in are not beyond his scrutiny and judgment. And the passage we're looking at today gives us a picture of the end.

The end of everything. The end to which everything is heading in this creation. The end which will involve us all and every human being that's ever lived.

The end which Jesus will bring about when he returns. In the end, what will come of our deepest longings so eloquently expressed in the online world and so often frustrated?

[10 : 48] Our desire for significance. Our desire to know and to be known. Well, two things stand out from chapter 21 in relation to those with great clarity.

Now, let me say Revelation 21 is rich with Bible images. And we don't have a hope of exploring even a part of them really this evening. But I want to mention two things that stand out from this chapter.

Big, broad, brushstroke ideas. First, in the end, there will be a new world. Chapter 21, verse 1.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. When the Bible talks of heaven and earth, it basically means sky and land.

Back at the beginning, God creates the heavens and the earth, which means that he creates what you can see, the sky above and the earth below. Here we have new ones, new heaven, new earth.

[11 : 49] God is in the business of making things new. That's what he says he's doing. Verse 5. He who was seated on the throne said, behold, I am making all things new.

Let me say three things about this new world as described here, this new creation. First, it is a world of substance. It's real.

It's real stuff. Sky, land, people, city. Most people, can I say, have very unappetizing pictures in their minds of what the Bible holds out to us for the future.

In a conversation with a guy a little while ago, we got to the point where I said to him, look, God offers eternal life to all those who are willing to have Jesus as their king. And he said, well, he would want to live forever.

And of course, that's a good question, isn't it? You wouldn't want to live life forever if it was like this in this world. There are so many dreadful things about this world the way it is, are there not?

[12 : 53] And let me say, the more you do of it, the more sure you become that one day you will have had enough of this world. If you're too young to think that, let me assure you, you will.

And going somewhere else seems quite appealing, really. But who would want to go to heaven as many people think of heaven? A sort of cloudy, cotton-woolly, disembodied dreamland.

In many ways, that's a good deal less appealing than what we have here. At least this feels real. Now, this passage is a very helpful antidote to that rather unappetizing, spineless picture.

For what God is actually involved in is the restoring business, the recreating business. He's making things new, a new world. Not a nasty, cloudy, daydreamy sort of place.

Nor a digital, virtual, screeny sort of place either. Would you want to live forever if all you could have was a glorified version of Facebook? Hardly. No, what's being promised here is a new world.

[13 : 56] A world of substance. A world in which real people do real things. In real resurrected bodies. It's a world of substance. Second, it's a world without suffering.

Look at verse 3. God will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death shall be no more.

For neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. Nothing is more obvious in our world, or indeed in our online world, as the sufferings of the world.

On our news feeds. In our blog posts. On the iPlayer. The bad news of the world streams into our lives.

In any one day online, so much human suffering comes to your attention that you can't possibly take it all in. Never mind thinking about it all and responding to it appropriately and humanly.

[15 : 01] And often the only way to respond to that is to log into Facebook again and exchange trivial chat with somebody we know as a diversionary activity. The online world informs us of all the difficulties of the world and also distances us from those difficulties.

But what God has promised is something quite different in quality from this world. Something altogether more satisfying, even exhilarating.

Think of it. A recreated world with no death anymore. I wonder what proportion of the room here has been affected by death this year.

It'll be high. And the older you get, the more likely it will that you are. A world in which nobody has cause for tears anymore.

Can you imagine that? Not having to cry over something dreadful anymore. A world in which nobody hurts anymore.

[16 : 08] It's almost unimaginable, isn't it? But that is what God has promised. That is what he's going to do. A new world with none of the things that make this old world so acutely uncomfortable.

A world of substance. Yet a world without suffering. Amazingly, in short, it's the world we all long for.

We want a world with the substance, but without the suffering. The longing for that is the kind of thing that on our better days gets us out of bed in the morning.

Even the most self-centered of us work for this, to make this real world bearable for ourselves and for other people. God is in the restoring business.

God is in the restoring business. The world restoring business. The recreating business. He's promised to do it. A new world. Let me go on to the second big thing that's promised in this chapter.

[17 : 17] In the end, there will be a new Jerusalem. Verse 2. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man and he will live with them. And they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.

But immediately we meet something strange. For there is much more in this chapter about the new Jerusalem than about the new creation. Verse 9 through all the way through to chapter 22 is all about the new Jerusalem, describing it in detail.

Its measurements, the stuff it's made out of, the number of gates it's got, what they're made out of, that kind of thing. Why is that? Well, I think the answer is this.

So much of the Bible story focuses in on the story of this city of Jerusalem. And it's not that God isn't all the time thinking about the whole world and the whole of creation.

[18 : 24] It's that his plan for the whole world has been very much tied up with this city and worked through this city. But when Jerusalem is talked about in the Bible, the focus is not on the physical city and the buildings.

It's not because God is an architect or a civil engineer or a quantity surveyor that he's concerned with cities. No, the focus all the way through when we're talking about Jerusalem and the Bible is on the people and their relationship with one another and their relationship with God.

A special community of people built by God. A community that he wanted to use to bring blessing to the world.

Why so much about the new Jerusalem here? Well, I think it reflects the Bible's focus on the importance of humanity and our relationships within the created order that God has made.

So big is that concern in this chapter that it's almost as if the city has expanded to fill the whole of the new creation. It is often thought by those who concern themselves with the state of the planet that the whole thing would be better off without human beings.

[19 : 45] One can see why we so often mess it up. But even though the Bible takes the wrongdoing of human beings very seriously indeed, the Bible does not share the perspective that the world would be better without us.

Human relationship with one another and with God is at the very center of the created order. It's like that in Genesis chapter 1 and it's like that in Revelation chapter 21.

And here, pictured at the end, is a perfect, glorious human community. A new world city.

A community of people with God at its heart. Jerusalem is all about relationship in the Bible. Relationship with God. Relationship with people. Now, it's not possible to do justice to all the imagery about this city in the short time we have.

But I want to say two or three things about the picture that's painted for us here of this new city. First, this is a picture of a glorious community.

[20 : 49] Look, well, just for example, there are many we could pick. Look at verse 17. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement.

The wall was built of jasper. The city was of pure gold, clear as glass. The fountains of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. Jasper, sapphire, and all those other ones with difficult names.

Many jewels of all sorts. This is a glorious picture. There's nothing second rate or cheap or shoddy about this construction that's pictured here.

You cannot read this picture and think that God has something cheap and miserable in mind for the future of his people.

Look how it's put in verse 9, a different image. One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke to me saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb.

[21 : 52] This is the language of display. Look at this, he says. This is not a horrid bride. An ugly, unattractive, gloomy, poorly dressed, unpleasant woman that we're being introduced to here.

No, this is the bride of Jesus, the great king. His people made perfect for him. Now let me say that no bridegroom shows off a bride without expecting everyone to agree about her loveliness.

I've heard many, many speeches by bridegrooms. And I have never, ever heard one of them say, My wife and I, that's how they all start, isn't it? My wife and I, well you can have a look at her if you want.

She looks okay, doesn't she? They never say that, do they? They just never say that. No, the angel stands back and says, Look at her, would you?

Look at her. Isn't she amazing? Heaven is passionate about what Jesus has done for his church, his bride, his people.

[23 : 02] He is in the business of making her into a glorious community with him at the heart of it. Verse 22, I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb.

Jesus at the heart of this new community. Let me say to you, Christian, I wonder if you need to revise your thinking about church. Jesus is passionate about his people.

I wonder if that squares with how we view church. It's so easy, isn't it, to say about church, Well, it's alright, I suppose.

But there are so many things wrong with it, so many things to criticise. And it's easy to lose sight of just how precious to the Lord Jesus are the people that belong to him.

So precious that he's going to make something indescribably brilliant out of them at the end and live with his people, with no barriers, face to face forever.

[24 : 14] Relationship of the sort that we so deeply long for and is so elusive. A glorious community. Second thing that's worth saying about it is that this is a secure community. Look at verse 25. The gates of the city will never be shut by day and there will be no night there.

They will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations, but nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false. Why do cities shut their gates at night?

Well, because that's when danger comes upon them. But all danger has been removed from this city. No night to shut the doors against. No impurity to shut out anymore.

No one to harm the people of God. No one to take them for a ride. No one to threaten their security ever again. Don't Christians in every age need to hear that reassurance?

[25 : 20] We might be all too aware of the tremendous threats that exist in this world to the security of the people of God. All over the world today, Christians are in prison for being Christian.

All over the world this Christmas time, there will be Christian families who will celebrate the coming of Jesus for the first time without a father or brother or son who has been killed because they follow Jesus.

We may be all too aware of the power of the devil, the lies and deceit and division that he sows in Christian communities.

There are plenty of threats visible and invisible to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. But God promises that all of that is temporary.

There will, when Jesus returns, be security and safety forever for his perfected people.

[26 : 23] The section before, chapter 21, deals with the removal of all the threats and dangers. Throughout this book, a number of fierce enemies have been identified.

The state which so often oppresses God's people. False religion which so often persecutes God's people. The devil who accuses and tempts God's people. And of course death, that ultimate enemy which seems to rule so powerfully over the whole of humanity, including God's people.

But in chapters 19 and 20, all those enemies are destroyed forever, finally. Even death. So that this new Jerusalem is a secure community.

Security is one of the great longings and motivators of human beings. Well, here it is. Let me sum up. Our time is nearly gone.

The online world reveals with great clarity some of the things that are dearest to us. Our longing for significance. Our longing for relationship.

[27 : 32] And yet these things are so elusive. Not just online, but of course in the rest of life. Well, God promises a new world. A world of substance.

A real world. A world without suffering. The world we all long for. And a new Jerusalem. A glorious community of relationship with God at the center.

A secure community with all threats and enemies destroyed forever. It's a wonderfully encouraging picture. Let me close with two observations. One from the beginning of the chapter.

And one from the end. First, from the beginning. Only God can make this new world. Look at verse 2. I saw the holy city.

New Jerusalem. Coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. What we long for requires the abolition of suffering.

[28 : 33] The permanent installation of harmony and peace. And excuse me for stating the obvious. But that is not within our power to deliver. As human beings.

We've observed in the last few weeks. How the online experience. Reveals with great clarity. Our inability. To generate those things for ourselves.

Indeed. When we use our powers. To work for such things. And leave God out of the picture. We demonstrate our share. In the great folly and tragedy of humanity.

When we try to build a happy family. And leave God out. We display our arrogance and folly. When we try to build a secure marriage.

And leave God out. We forget somehow that death will come along one day. And muck it all up forever. When we work for our own personal security.

[29 : 32] And leave God out. We forget somehow that our pension will accomplish nothing for us. In the grave. This is God's world. We cannot escape having to relate to him in the end.

We will not have what we long for without him. We will not get by if we ignore him. Only God can do what we so long for.

We will not get by as Christians if we ignore him either. We will not get by as a church family if we ignore him. Some of the churches mentioned at the beginning of this great book.

Were beginning to do that. To live without reference to God. But dependence on God is the proper thing for his creatures to do. At every point in ease and in difficulty.

This is his world. He made it. Not us. He rules it. Not us. Only he will be able to remove the threats. We certainly won't be able to. Only he can make it new. Only he can bring security.

[30 : 34] In fact the reality is that the thing that makes this promised world what it will be. Is that he is close to people. Verse 3. Behold the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will be with them. And they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. If you are a person who has been living at a distance from God.

Trying life without God. Longing for the things that you long to have without God. Now would be a great turn to turn away from that right now.

It is a fruitless enterprise. It will accomplish nothing in the end. Only God can do what we most long for. Second observation.

And this time from the end of the chapter. Only Christians can enter this new world. Verse 27. Nothing unclean will ever enter it.

[31 : 34] Nor anyone who does what is detestable or false. But only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Jesus' people will enter this new world.

This new city. Not because they are better than anyone else. The whole of the Bible story makes that crystal clear. It is because no one is fit for this future.

That Jesus came to die for the sins of the world. And this is expressed in shorthand in verse 27. Listen. Only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. It's not because of good behavior that people get in.

For our behavior excludes us. But only because of the life-giving work. Of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Lamb who was slain.

That this future can be ours. Only God can do this new world. And only those who belong to Jesus can belong to it. Let's summarize.

[32 : 35] Online. Face-to-face knowledge and intimacy. Is something that we long for. And yet we shrink from. That face-to-face thing.

Is quite a big issue. In the book of Revelation. Quite a big deal is made of it. Turn back to chapter 6 verse 15. Here is one sort of face-to-face encounter.

Or rather. Trying to avoid face-to-face encounter. 6 verse 15. Then the kings of the earth.

And the great ones. And the generals. And the rich. And the powerful. And everyone. Slave and free. Hid themselves in the caves. And among the rocks of the mountains. Calling to the mountains and rocks.

Fall on us. And hide us. From the face of him who's seated on the throne. And from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come. And who can stand?

[33 : 35] For some it will be terrifying. To behold the face of God. And of the Lord Jesus Christ. But look on to chapter 22.

And look at verse 3. No longer will there be anything accursed. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it.

And his servants will worship him. They will see his face. And his name will be on their foreheads. Two responses to the face of God.

For good or ill. Everyone will face up to God in the end. It will be longing fulfilled. Or terror fully realized.

Joy. Or shame. One way or the other. It's inescapable. It will be what we most long for.

[34 : 41] Or what we most fear. And in this world. Is the deciding time. Let's pray together. Amen. Our gracious God.

We thank you for this. Wonderfully encouraging picture. Of the future. We thank you that in this chapter. We see. All those things that we most deeply long for.

As human beings. Is the things established. Security. Significance. Real knowledge. Face to face with you. And in harmony with others.

So much of our lives. We long for these things. Thank you for this promise. That they can be ours. And belong to others as well.

We recognize that only you can do this. Please deliver us. From being self-assured. And self-dependent.

[35 : 51] We recognize that only those who belong to Jesus. Can possess this. Because of his great work. Please help us today. While there's time.

To put our trust in him. And whatever comes to us in life. This today. Or this week. As individuals. As a church family.

We pray that you'd help us. To hold on to your promise. About the future. To trust what you've said. To take you at your word. And to look forward to that great day.

This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.